愚オロカモノ物ガタリ語

Yotsugi Ononoki, the shikigami girl assigned to watch over Koyomi Araragi. This dead tsukumogami girl faces a challenge, but what exactly is that do-or-die struggle with her life on the line? As the "story" grows, it keeps on running, ever burning bright!

These are the modern-day oddities! Oddities! Oddities!

Youth is going back and forth between pain and peace.

OROKAMONOGATARI
FOOL'S TALE
NISIOISIN

OROKAMONOGATARI
NISIOISIN

愚物語
オロカモノガタリ

物語シリーズオフシーズン

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CHAPTER ONE
SODACHI FIASCO

001

I loathe Koyomi Araragi. How much do I hate him? Goodness, I hate him so much it overwhelms me. Simply thinking about him is heartrending agony. I stop being able to think about anything else. Even if all the hatred in the world were gathered together like a bouquet, it would be no match for the singular hatred I have for Araragi. My hatred rivals the sun.

If I were to lose this revulsion, I could no longer be myself. My rampant contempt for Araragi is my identity as a person, the axis of my being; the dead center of my very self. If I did not hate him, it would be impossible for me to be me. I have withstood all the terrible things I've seen, and all the tragedies and disasters I've faced, by comparing those adversities to that man.

I am very afraid that this hate, this dizziness and heartburn and nausea and shivers and goosebumps, will disappear from inside of me. Just imagining myself forgiving him, even a little, makes me feel like dying. That is how fragile my presence is inside of me, and how impudent his is.

I wonder if what he did to me is equal to how much I hate him—no, I feel such disgust for that man that there is no room for any sensible doubt. Simply remembering Araragi's smile, his kindness, his concern, his

friendliness, and all of his actions, I feel like weeping. Neither riches nor torture, no matter how bountiful or ghastly, can make me reconcile with Araragi. This alone I cannot allow; this alone I cannot yield.

Hate with hate yet hate for hate to hate in hate at hate by hate of hate.

I hate him I hate him I hate him

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These feelings are surely even more intense than love.

002

Over a month had passed since I left Naoetsu High School. It's all nostalgic for me now, even the affair in that classroom that was so tightly and inseparably coiled around my heart, like a curse… I still haven't put it all behind me to the point where I could say something like that. But, now that I've gone away, it seems like it all could have been a dream.

I don't mean that as a lyrical cliché, like, "But that dream was really a nightmare"; when I say *dream*, I mean that literally.

Incoherent, nonsensical, scattered from place to place, an ambiguous and vague center, boundlessly vast, and yet all that faintly remained with me was something like the dregs of an impression—that kind of illusive dream.

Even if a long time were to pass and I could no longer remember the layout of that classroom, I doubt I could ever put that class behind me.

I wonder if *that man* is haunted by it as well.

Thinking about that is a little thrilling.

And so, today, I begin a new high school life in a new town.

I had no choice in the matter, though.

I was an exile banished from my hometown, and, slipping into feelings of desperation, I thought about just quitting high school once and for all… but that was easier said than done. No matter what it

might be, “quitting” something is a very hard thing to do—quitting high school was just as difficult as committing suicide.

At least get through high school.

And I never imagined there would be someone to say that hackneyed line to *me*. I’d thought it was an artificial expression, as suspicious and shameless as saying that life is very precious and all people are equal; nevertheless, when it was said to me, I was affected. “Well, I guess that’s right.”

Moreover, the one who said it was my guardian, so as a dependent I was in no position to do anything but hang my head and go along.

Of course, when I say *guardian*, I don’t mean a parent.

I have no parents. No father, no mother.

They’re gone.

They went away.

So the *guardian* I’m talking about here refers to the benevolent couple who, despite having no relation and being complete strangers, decided to look after an orphan with no relatives.

The Hakobe couple.

Probation officers—well, not quite, but for an easy comparison, I suppose they’re like foster parents.

Having left Naoetsu High School after many twists and turns, I became restless and flighty, and I found myself deciding that the home of an elderly couple would be my next destination.

The room I was given was even bigger than the public apartment where I'd lived before.

The Town Hall person ought to have been able to arrange for me to keep living by myself even after leaving town, but for reasons I simply can't fathom, that's how it turned out—though I guess it's typical of me to get swept away in a flow of events I don't really understand. Maybe they had to put a stop to a parentless minor living alone; or maybe, by a stroke of luck, this unfortunate girl just happened to catch the eyes of a wealth family.

A stroke of luck? Me? That's funny.

…Of course, after returning to my senses from my confused state, I might have stubbornly refused at the last minute, and I probably could have maintained the solitary lifestyle of an outcast… but, following much hesitation, I decided to come into the care of the Hakobe family.

My reasons were a mystery, even for me.

Honestly, it would be hard to say that I had no feelings of nostalgia—although the time when I'd taken "refuge" in the home of complete strangers is nothing but a miserable memory for me, it's one of my only memories of a "home".

A meager memory.

I wanted to live in a home.

If that was the reason, it's a paltry one—or rather, a pitiful one—or even, a perverse one… You could call that slipping into desperation too.

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At this point, a wretched girl like me has no hope of building real relationships with people—if it were one month ago, I might have believed that, and stubbornly insisted on it; but, whether it's paltry or pitiful or perverse, if I kept insisting that now, I'd feel a sense of defeat.

Like I'd lost to that man.

If he's changed, then I'll change too.

If he's happy, then I'll become happier.

That was my deepest desire, and I could give up on everything else for its sake.

So, I decided to attend high school from the Hakobe home.

Although I was told that it wouldn't be a problem for me to attend a private school since I was receiving financial assistance from the government, I of course declined, and decided to transfer to a public high school.

That said, even I have some points of pride, and even though that pride had been my downfall, it wasn't something I could easily abandon; so, I chose to transfer to the school with the highest test scores in the area.

I easily passed the entrance examination.

The marvelous fruits of having nothing to do but study during my period of truancy.

Well, since I'm transferring in November in second term, I won't be at this school for more than four months. And actually, since third years don't really have a third term, it might be as short as one month.

So it won't feel at all like an alma mater, and I'm not thinking of spreading roots here—I can't say I was happy when I attended Naoetsu High school either, but in the end it's that school, and that classroom, where my roots are more intertwined.

I don't suppose there could ever be a crueler classroom than that one, and that's enough to get me through my first day as a transfer student.

But I've got to be on my guard.

After all, it's in my nature to think up plans to the point of absurdity, and fail spectacularly in ways I couldn't foresee.

This short month of school life is just a bonus of a bonus, but if I want to spend it peacefully and uneventfully, I need to be prepared.

Oji-sama, Oba-sama, see you later—saluting the Hakobe couple, I departed. My break is over—I don't even know when it started, but my break is over—and I'm setting out toward a new life.

Just you wait, Araragi.

Sodachi Oikura is going to grow up.

003

The first person to make meringues was incredible, don't you think? Cracking an egg and separating the yoke from the whites is an earth-shattering idea in itself, but to think they'd beat only the whites instead of the yoke, which you can tell at a glance is more abundant in nutrients… There's no way they could have predicted that if they beat just the egg whites, if they kept patiently beating and whipping the egg whites, then it would turn into something like whipped cream, is there? And then they took that tasteless, flavorless thin foam and baked it into a dessert; it's simply astonishing—this is no good.

Rejected, rejected; totally rejected.

Would anyone introduce themselves like that?

If a transfer student greeted people like that on her first day, her nickname would inevitably become "Meringue"—if they could cleverly derive "Renge" from it then that would be quite fortuitous, but rather than bet on a miracle like that, the correct decision would be to not present myself as a weirdo in the first place.

My intention was to act cutesy by saying my hobby was making sweets, but when I tried to show off a strong point of mine, my thought process got out of whack.

Calm down; there's no need to make people think I'm a girl who has weird opinions… well, it might become necessary in certain situations, but I'm not obligated to

present my idiosyncrasies to classmates I'll only have for a single month.

Uneventful.

My first priority is to make it to graduation without any of the hardships I encountered at Naoetsu High School; I don't need to display my idiosyncrasies, I need to temper and conceal their presence.

I have to get down from the conspicuous position of transfer student as quickly as possible—I don't need any of those "transfer student tropes" you see all the time in manga.

It's going to be all right. I'm cute, under normal circumstances.

It's true that I've been through hell, but the only person who's hit me in the face is Hitagi Senjougahara.

I actually had some friends at Naoetsu High School. A boy even confessed to me. If I can just keep silent, I should at least be able to meet the vague expectations people have of transfer students.

Just by wearing a uniform, my apparently abnormal fashion sense can be smoothed over.

I just have to avoid doing anything stupid.

Nice to meet you; my name is Sodachi Oikura. I'm sorry for disturbing you by transferring partway through the term. It seems like graduation will be here before we know it, but even so, I look forward to working with you as a member of the class.

That's it. The right banality. Aim to be normal.

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Present yourself as harmless and unexceptional.

There's zero need to tell them that I revere the mathematician Euler, much less to request they call me that—I don't have to announce out loud all of the people I idolize.

They'll be disappointed.

"Try to be ordinary" is itself a fairly childish way of thinking, but this is probably what it means to become an adult—not feeling sorry for myself.

Let's rid ourselves of that unproductive self-pity.

As long as I consider myself unfortunate, I'll stay unfortunate my whole life—well, there's no question my life has been laughably unfortunate, no matter how you stretch it to try to interpret it positively. If you probe it too far, you won't want to solve the mystery, but rather to be put out of your misery.

If anyone told me, "It's all in the way you look at things!", I'd kill them.

However, being unfortunate doesn't mean you can't find happiness. If I find happiness, I'll say "it's all in the way you look at things" too.

I'll rub it in his face.

I'll do anything for that.

…That said, no matter how worked up I get about it, I can't shake this deep-set feeling that's it's all futile, that it's all a waste of effort.

As you can see from my extraordinary disgust and outrageous hatred for him,

Koyomi Araragi's presence within me is gigantic; however, the Sodachi Oikura inside of Koyomi Araragi is nothing more than one of many. Not even one of many—maybe nothing at all.

I don't know how many times he's forgotten me.

How many times he's ignored me, or pretended I didn't exist.

Come to think of it, that might have actually been a form of "special treatment", but that's no reason for me to accept it, and I think he's just fundamentally hopeless.

He's a hero who doesn't even remember the face of the person he saves—even if it's hard for me to understand, after everything I've been through, I have no choice but accept that people like that exist in the world.

It's not just him; all the members of the Araragi family are the same way, and I'm sure the Hakobe couple will be no exception—I'll never be able to be like that, though, nor do I want to be.

Even if I get past this misery and find happiness, he'll just congratulate me with a cheerful, carefree "Good for you!"—that's an extremely vexing prospect.

I ended up thinking about it.

What should I do, how would things have to happen for me to be able to argue him down? I shudder to think that he'll just give me a pleasant and soothing response no matter what I do, and no matter what happens.

But there's one thing of which I'm certain—absolutely certain. If that man found out that I'd become excessively isolated, or caused problems in my new school, he'd be very sad.

Nothing would bring me as much joy as making him feel bad, but, well, I've already done that stuff.

In a way, that would just be what he'd expect.

I don't want him to think, "I guess that's just the way she is."

Doing well at my new school would be the best way to betray Araragi—the first step toward that goal is to "aim to be normal".

With a smug look, I'll let him know that being normal is the best way to happiness.

Resolving to make that happen, I arrived at Shishikurasaki Public High School, which was located three stops away from the Hakobes' house.

Before even entering the school, I'd started mixing in with other students wearing the Shishikurasaki uniform on the way; they were unfamiliar… that is to say, these boys and girls seemed somehow different from the students at Naoetsu High School. It might just be my prejudice, but I sensed a certain calmness in their expressions.

At Naoetsu High School, a private, college-prep school, every last one of us was driven, myself included—everyone was on edge. Of course, I enrolled because I had wanted an environment like that, so I have no reason to be critical.

Can people really change this much just from being in a different environment? …I unconsciously started feeling envious and viewing my surroundings as hostile, but I realized what was happening and hurriedly got myself under control.

This is no good.

I can easily develop an inferiority complex toward anyone and everyone; it's my worst aspect. I know that.

I construct myself by envying others.

How to put it… It takes a lot of courage to accept that you're a good-for-nothing person, which is a pretty sad thing in the first place, but that's probably just what I need right now.

No doubt everyone feels that way to some extent, but as long as I keep thinking this way, I'll never advance even a single step forward.

It's as if I'm standing still, facing backwards.

If you perceive anything and everything to be a competition or a struggle, you'll constantly build up stress. And besides, there's no way the students at this school get on without any stress.

It's not possible.

Stress always starts to build up when people are gathered together, which gives rise to discord. That's precisely why I mustn't be careless.

My isolation in that classroom at Naoetsu High School was due more to arrogance than carelessness, but if I'm negligent, I'll end up

committing the same ugly mistakes all over again.

It's not unlikely I'll become a hikikomori again—we might not understand each other yet, but I don't want to make the Hakobes regret taking me in.

I don't know what the future holds.

I think it would be terribly shameless for a freeloader like me to try to go on to college after graduating high school—but actually, such a future is possible for me if I make full use of subsidies and student loans. Those safety nets are strung throughout the world; I just couldn't see them—no, I hadn't even tried to see them.

Naturally, it's hard to feel blessed based on that knowledge alone, but at the very least, I suppose I'm lucky to have been born in a place like this… So, I've got to get the most out of it that I can.

Standing in front of the school gates, lost in thought, I began to feel like I was being glanced at repeatedly by passersby; it might be excessive self-consciousness, or my persecution complex, or perhaps there was something odd about the way I was wearing my uniform.

Although I knew that I was just being looked at for being a nuisance and a bother by obstructing passage, I got an urge to look in a mirror, and in my effort to escape I hastily stepped toward my new school.

It was a disappointing way to take my first step.

004

In the end, when I introduced myself for the first time to my new comrades, it was less a bright, sunny moment in the spotlight and more of a cloudy, overcast debut; it was difficult to say I did well–if anything, it was a massive failure, certainly not any kind of success.

I tried my best to be ordinary, and I hadn't planned to display any eccentricities, but before I managed to struggle to the end of my script, I got disgracefully flustered. I'm sure there's no small number of students who think my name is "Oshikura" now.

Bathing in the stares of 40 people, I was overcome with stage fright, my tongue went round and round in snarles, and my voice became shamefully shrill and hollow–I don't know how many words I flubbed during my self-introduction.

It was more words than I managed to get right.

I was so embarrassed, I wanted to lean over to avoid eye contact–I'd like to praise myself for at least being able to stay standing upright until the very end.

I did well. At not doing well, that is.

This isn't how I wanted to remember it… That it had ended up like this despite the perfectly plausible plan I had developed beforehand seemed more embarrassing than anything.

But this is how I am now.

If I'm surrounded by a crowd of people, when they all look at me, it seems like they're finding fault, and I can't hold onto my sanity.

It's starting to feel like everyone's laughing at my big failure–calm down, regain your composure. In reality, even though I've become the target of that laughter for my comical stuttering, it's not like I'm being showered in scorn. It's not like there's any more ill will in that laughter–those boys and girls are only laughing in amusement.

I'm being made fun of just the proper amount.

In the first place, I had only wanted to handle my self-introduction flawlessly (though it was a failure), and even though I had wanted to be told, "You're so good at making speeches," not to mention pampered for my success, it wasn't like I wanted to become a popular person in the class.

Hadn't I learned well in my previous school that that kind of fighting for a brittle hegemony was so very foolish?

Get some self-control, analyze yourself.

Just like when solving a tricky, complicated math problem, it becomes simple when you follow the procedure and apply the formula, I can arrange all of this like data.

The reason why I become obstinate when facing this crowd, and why I freeze up in front a large number of people, is that I'm scared of these boys and girls.

If a crowd of conspirators form up to wield violence against me, I'd be at my wit's end all

by myself–but it's all right. No one is going to hit or beat me here. There aren't that many crazy people who would get up and kick me because I messed up my self-introduction–and besides, since I'd be frightened of humiliation, it's fine if I don't stand at the top of the group.

Rather, because I'm guilty of trying to force myself to the top, I was driven out by the group–I need to understand that I am not a person who can give orders to a crowd, nor stand above them.

At least, not anymore.

I have a bad personality. I'm uncooperative. I degrade myself. I'm spiteful. I'm jealous. I'm distrusting. I'm charmless. I have a powerful victim complex. I'm hysteric. I'm a fool who boasts of intelligence. I'm a masochist. I'm easily intoxicated by my own misfortune. I blame anything and everything on others–on Araragi.

Fundamentally, there's no way someone like that could become a popular person just by doing somewhat well with their self-introduction–after all, it would be improper to somehow use my status as an end-of-term transfer student as a veil to mask my own ugly nature.

There's no such thing as magic, and people don't suddenly change like that. I moved to a different city, I'm living in a different house, going to a different school, wearing a different uniform–but it's not as if I've changed.

I am me, and that skin doesn't come off.

Fine, fine.

Taking a disappointing first step toward a new life, I ended up stumbling spectacularly, but I can't say I completely fell over–I didn't flip over the teacher's desk, or grab anything and throw it, or scratch on the blackboard to hide the shame of my failure. I didn't suddenly start bawling, or throw anything at the homeroom teacher. I didn't follow up my failure with an even bigger failure by taking off my uniform on the spot.

See, I evaded the worst possible situation.

If I say so myself, I feel as though I'm taking negative thinking to the limit by hypothesizing all these terrible situations, but I have simply no idea what I'll achieve by chasing it all the way to the end. Because at any rate, in the end my thoughts became obstinate, as jumbled up and wild as the time I exposed myself in fancy pajamas in front of the man I despise.

Thinking about it, what did it matter that I wasn't I at least able to say my name correctly–certainly, I was unexpectedly embarrassed, but I wasn't trying to look cool or anything (I am truly glad I didn't talk about meringues–if I had, I fear I might have really gone crazy), and anyhow, I lost face in front of classmates I'd only be with for one short month.

It's fine if I cast aside this shame.

Looking forward, past graduation, I can think of this as rehabilitation–if I couldn't deal with feeling ashamed, then I couldn't very well go out into society.

I'm afraid of becoming an adult while still possessing this personality. Right now, I'm 18 years old–I'm an age at which I've even been afforded the right to vote. It would certainly be a terrible thing if I haven't yet become something of a better person by the time I'm 20–no, at least by the time I'm 22.

While I definitely can't say anything specific about how I'll end up, if I stay the cruel character that I am, it seems like sooner or later I'll commit a crime against society and get thrown in jail–I have to sever this chain of events before that.

It'd be good to break that off now.

The reasons why I'm misfortunate are innumerable, and there are infinite reasons why I'll be misfortunate from now on–however, there's not a single reason why I can't become happy.

…For that matter, by no means is everything about this failure today purely bad. After all, from looking at my classmates, who thought I seemed odd after I flubbed my self-introduction, I could sense the general atmosphere of the class into which I'd transferred.

I could study their reactions after providing a moderate stimulus.

As I expected–it's different from Naoetsu High School.

For better or for worse, it felt like a standard so-called "school"… though I'd only experienced a very short high school life, if I were to compare the two high schools, the

mood here felt closer to my time in junior high.

Since a lot of people have been crammed into a narrow space, there's no doubt people here (especially people like me) felt stressful, but just as I'd thought, the stress here seemed different from at Naoetsu High School.

No.

What's different might be the rules.

I felt as though the customs of this classroom differed in composition from those of that previous classroom–in a way, just because the deviation score was high at Naoetsu High School, the rules were reflected in the hierarchy of students.

To explain it another way, however much of a good person you were, however strong your sense of justice, a man like Koyomi Araragi, for example, would be treated as the lowest type of person just for having poor grades. Even in the case of the reckoning I received at that classroom trial, it was still a trial held concerning grades–at the time, I had thought that it was a proper, ordinary school function that could be held anywhere, but thinking about it now, it was probably a highly unique event.

Since Shishikurasaki High School was also a school trying to prepare students for college, I probably couldn't say that grades contributed nothing to students' social standing, but more than grades, it seemed more like human relationships that were the relevant factor.

For one, it didn't seem like bringing smartphones to school had been prohibited–such a thing had been altogether unthinkable at Naoetsu High School–and it seemed that communication prowess was an exceptionally important part of survival in this class. I fear that just having good grades might have the opposite effect, and could end up making me hated–what I ought to focus on was my charm as a person.

…It's good that I realized that early in the process, however, for me, that information nearly left me in despair.

The reason is, well, that I could say I'm a professional at lacking charm–I could certainly brag that I wouldn't lose to any run-of-the-mill charm-lackers.

That, at least, hadn't been revealed by my stuttering self-introduction, but if I stay without a plan to counteract it, there's no doubt my true nature will eventually be exposed. They say that when in Rome, do as the Romans do, but that's such an unbearable regulation.

It's overly strict.

On the other hand, I am not a reformer trying to propose revisions to the rules here–my social standing is that of a newcomer. Although I'm repeating myself, I'll only be here for a short time.

This was just a short, one-month sojourn into a different country with utterly different laws. It would be best to pass this time by concealing myself, lowering my head and

squeezing myself in so as to not conflict with the local culture–so to that end…

While thinking of that goal, a peaceful, uneventful, no-trouble and stress-free high school life, for a brief moment, my eyes fell on one particular student among my 40 classmates–or more correctly, 41 classmates.

Seat number 41.

Her name was Amiko Yurugase.

005

When forming groups of 2, groups of 3, even groups of 4, there's always a man left out–being the man left out was, of course, a specialty of the Araragi whom I despise; however, since you never know when such a situation might befall you, it's better to keep a clear head and think of how best to avoid being the odd one out: always have a partner in mind for a possible group of 2.

It's a purely academic theory, but…, if I had a partner like that, then I'd obviously always form a group of 2 with them, and it'd be reassuring to pair with them when forming groups of 3 and groups of 4 as well.

I wouldn't fail to find a group and get left out, and even if it feels like "there aren't enough people to go around," my feelings of isolation should weaken. That's what I think.

It would be a bit too high of a hurdle for a vagrant like me to suddenly become friendly with all 41 of my classmates, but if there's just a single person among the 40 that I can easily get along with… I wouldn't quite say 'easily', but I don't know how I could manage anything else if I weren't able to at least complete a low-level task like this.

Well, strictly speaking, it's not 'a single person among the 40', but a single person among the 20-ish–in this case, I couldn't imagine finding a boy to become friends with. I could even say my thinking would run in the opposite direction–at Naoetsu High School, boys and girls were mixed together, or rather

boys and girls were socially equal, or rather, at least, boys and girls were mixed together on the seating chart; however, at Shishikurasaki High School, the seats in the classroom were clearly split down the middle between boys and girls.

It's based on an old-fashioned custom…, at least, that's what it looked like to me, but I suppose this was very normal for most co-ed schools.

So, in this kind of atmosphere, a girl trying to form a group of 2 with a boy would just negatively stand out; there'd be no benefit– the result would simply be drawing animosity upon myself, as a new girl trying to butter up the boys.

A girl flirting with a boy…, I could say that might just be a misunderstanding of how my situation with Araragi began, but it would certainly be harsh if I had to pass the next month with people thinking of me like that…, no matter where I was, someone like me would doubtless fall into hysterics. To be frank, I fear it would bring about some kind of bloody event.

So, the partner with whom I ought to make friends will be someone among the 20 or so girls who make up half the class's population–rather than saying that would be fortunate, it might possibly be the ordinary thing to do for a normal high school student, but even though the size of this new class was at least as large as my old class, it seemed like the girls' influence was stronger than the boys'. For that matter, it seemed

difficult to say that it was utterly different from the strong sense of equality at Naoetsu High School, but… well, it should certainly be better to align myself with the more influential side.

Of course, this is simply a rationalization after the fact, but my bungled self-introduction also allowed my attention to be caught by the student I selected.

The target with whom I ought to become friends.

I fear that may lead to that "Look, it's the transfer student!" reaction I was dreading earlier, but–as I expected, as a transfer student, the first time I start a conversation with a classmate is momentous. That isn't an exaggeration; I fear that my daily life will be decided just from that.

Will I start talking with a student who seems kind, or will I start talking with a student whose tastes and interests seem to match mine, or will I start talking with a leader-like person…, as I'd investigated beforehand (I did investigate), there was a line of strategy and procedure to establish my personal safety by deliberately becoming closer to a group of left-out delinquents, but it appears that Shishikurasaki High School, the same as Naoetsu High School, had no obvious delinquents. The level of public morals seemed to have ensured there were no girls shortening their skirts, nor any boys unfastening their jackets–it might be more wholesome than at Naoetsu High School, where you could be forgiven for letting your

clothes get out of shape if your grades were good. If I were to break the atmosphere and speak honestly about my impression, it was so overly wholesome as to be suffocating, even to a person as serious–if not plain 'stiff'–as me.

Well, even if there were a group of delinquents, I don't think I'd be shrewd enough to curry favor by imitating them–if I were me from long ago, I might have been able to ignore appearances and do it, but now, it's fair to say I'd be the absolute worst at doing something like that.

…No, if I were me from long ago, I wouldn't have come up with all these various plans in the first place. I'd have worked out a more audacious plan. It's not like this was my first experience of transferring schools–I transferred away from the school I'd been attending back in junior high, but at that time it was more, how to put it, more of something I decided for myself. Maybe it was just desperation, but–before I'd experienced that classroom trial at Naoetsu High School, I had a strong competitive spirit.

I was a junior high schooler, after all.

Right now, it's impossible for me to behave the same way as I did back then–I'm barely managing to hold on to my mentality as a human, and it's as if I'm just a hollow paper decoration on the inside.

Ah, even that might not be a paper decoration, but a balloon–all it takes is a light poke, and it explodes with a loud noise; I'm just like that. Although, 'balloon' being

written as if it were a boat that moves with the wind, using that word here seems excessively romantic.[4]

Even if I were able to do that, in the end I would likely just repeat the same failures as always–in order to put an end to this period of my life, with all of its failures, it's essential for me to compromise.

If I were to speak of compromises I'd have to make, they would probably be… well, fine.

Anyway.

Let's set about this objective without making any waves.

Start with one person, and be friends with the whole class by graduation… that would be unreasonable, of course, but I'll make at least five, or even six friends. I'll make as at least as many friends as I have fingers.

I'm going to do well.

I'll get along in the world.

I'll live a peaceful, normal life in this peaceful, normal school–thus, after much deliberation, I selected my candidate for friendship. She was the classmate I'd noticed as I was stuttering my name: Amiko Yurugase.

Of course, the reason I chose her wasn't necessarily unrelated to the simple fact that the seat I'd been assigned was close to hers, but that was a secondary, if not a tertiary reason.

The reason I'd chosen her as my first target was more severe and straightforward–that is, it was because it seemed like she was being cut off from the rest of the class.

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It was hard to tell from a glance, and the homeroom teacher hadn't seemed to notice (or might just be pretending not to notice), but as far as a transfer student and outsider like me could see at a glance, she was being separated from the class.

Isolation.

So, it wasn't difficult to imagine that she would always be left out when the class formed groups of 2–since 41 was a prime number, it was certainly an easy thing for people to be left over.

If that's the case, then I'm sure she would be glad that the class population has increased by one–honestly, taking advantage of her weakness like that doesn't feel that bad, and while it's not a praiseworthy behavior, I need to use every means available to me.

It would be a bit blunt to say, 'Since we're both friendless, let's be friends,' but looking at it from the point of view of supply and demand, for Amiko Yurugase, building that kind of mutually beneficial relationship shouldn't be at all disadvantageous.

It would surely be a sweet symbiosis.

Only thinking about loss and gain and advantages and disadvantages in this situation seems like a basic character trait of mine, but even so, I can't help but delay making a decision.

Well, in this world, there are people who would raise their own estimations of their value as a person for proactively starting a conversation with an isolated classmate, but

I'd like to think that that kind of person doing that kind of thing is more of a self-supporting proactive endeavor–I'm sorry, but I just don't have time to help people.

I'm different from that man, who'll eagerly sacrifice himself even if he can't afford to–I'm uncertain whether I even ought to treat myself as a victim.

Actually, there's something I think about once in a while.

Like maybe, in reality, I committed suicide a long, long time ago, and what I'm seeing now are just vague hallucinations on the verge of death–though if that's the case, if I'm about to die, I should at least have a more pleasant fantasy, right?

Even in my fantasies, I'm in hell.

No matter how I think about it, the idea that happiness and misfortune just depend on how you look at things is complete nonsense without an ounce of reason, but it's probably true that you can't lead a good life if you don't have a good self-image–if that's the case, even though I have no intention of thinking of myself as a girl with a kind spirit because I ignored the atmosphere in the classroom and called out to an isolated classmate at my new school, maybe doing that will help.

Well… I'm sure that's what that class rep, Tsubasa Hanekawa, would do if she were here. Though I have absolutely no intention of following that borderline monstrous honor student's example.

I might really die if I tried to do that.

34

… What I mean by that is, how to put it, those “eccentrics” like Tsubasa Hanekawa and Koyomi Araragi that you invariably see around at Naoetsu High School, wouldn’t be found at this school.

After all, regardless of whether they want to or not, those kinds of idiosyncratic people don’t end up in an honest place like this–or no, I suppose they were peculiar types even at Naoetsu High School.

Obviously, Amiko Yurugase didn’t seem like that at all.

As a girl who was isolated from the class, at least according to that aspect of her by itself, I could classify her the same way as that girl Hitagi Senjougahara; however, I can’t help but say I rather lack the knowledge to make such a categorization–she was like that when we were first years, but she was a curious type of high school girl who isolated herself of her own volition.

I say this confidently because I have experience being a hikikomori, but people who truly prefer solitude wouldn’t come to school in the first place–well, when I met her again a little while ago, it seemed she’d somewhat mellowed out.

If that damned Araragi had changed Hitagi Senjougahara, that’s a fact I couldn’t at all say about myself–was there even a chance for me to change like that? If there was, I don’t know how many times I’ve missed it.

No.

There's no question that this, right now, is the chance Araragi gave me–in that case, this time, I won't let this opportunity get away.

So, I will become friends with Amiko Yurugase. I'll do it.

First, I need to concentrate any and all of my excessive enthusiasm on that goal.

…Thinking about what will happen afterward, if I end up expending all of my energy and burning all of my calories just trying to make a single friend, that might be the origin of my next failure; but, just like during that classroom trial, as always, whatever I'm guilty of doing, I'm trying to do the right thing.

Thinking you're mistaken doesn't mean you're mistaken.

Thinking you'll be unfortunate doesn't mean you'll be unfortunate.

Even if that hope is barely there.

006

As I said before, I knew of no common points between Amiko Yurugase and Hitagi Senjougahara except that they were isolated; however, once I approached Amiko Yurugase to talk, I couldn't help but remember the time when I first spoke with Hitagi Senjougahara.

I ended up using past exam questions as a reference.

Even though I shouldn't be using references.

Although this is purely my own intuition, in this world, there are special people who can't be described beyond saying that they are "special people", and Hitagi Senjougahara was one of those–though I wouldn't necessarily go that far (strictly speaking, that probably just describes people like Tsubasa Hanekawa), even so, I ought to reflect on what it means to be someone in that category of "special".

With the exception of Araragi (to me, everything about that man is an exception), I should have broken off completely from Naoetsu High School at this point, but even so, I couldn't forget the intense impression that girl left me: ephemeral, with a weak constitution.

As if she were really ephemeral with a weak constitution. A little while ago, on my first day of school after returning from being a hikikomori, she punched me so hard I was sent to the infirmary… However, my strong

impression is not entirely due to that incident.

Special people.

Of course, I don't intend to keep rattling on endlessly about what makes special people special–it's just that I can't help but feel jealous.

As you know, I am a person who was unable to become special to anyone–I couldn't become special to Araragi, and I couldn't become special to my mother… I can't even say I'm special to myself–but that's alright now.

Since I'm not special, I can aim for mediocrity.

If I can't at least do that, I won't become anything.

But, even so, I ended up thinking about it.

There are not very many people like Tsubasa Hanekawa or Koyomi Araragi–each of them is a single rarity among a million.

I knew the emptiness of the words, "All people are equal," from seeing people of their ilk, but actually, because people who give off that kind of intense individuality are one in a million, it would be difficult to even encounter one, let alone become one.

That opportunity has probably passed me by already.

…By no means is having a relationship with a special person a purely positive influence on your life, either. I wonder how many hapless ordinary people have gotten carelessly involved with special people, and

ended up manipulated, exploited, abused, and discarded.

Thinking of the perils of being blinded by the special radiance of special people, the prudent choice would be to consider those men and women a risk to one's person and stay away from them.

This isn't manga.

It's not a world where it's fine if your character stands out–I mustn't forget that no matter how a manga protagonist acts in a story, in the end that's still antisocial behavior.

It's interesting to read for pleasure, but trying to act like that in the real world would be a disaster–somehow or other, I've ended up speaking about nothing but my jealousy after all; however, instead of complaints and grumblings about those men and women, what I've been pondering is rather, how did special people become special in the first place?

I'm always flustered by the argument that, "Although they went through the same unpleasant experiences as me, since they honestly did their best despite that, I ought not to sympathize with them just because of their unfortunate upbringing," but if I were to interpret it statistically–that is, mathematically–even though it's difficult for me understand, I suppose I have no choice but to recognize that those words carry certain amount of truth.

I wonder where I could find someone who grew up being abused by a good-for-nothing

family like me, but honestly did their best and grew up to become great–well, that's alright.

But, by the same logic, it seems there's a considerably dubious reason for why special people are special, though it's one that's most like me to talk about.

That would be, that those men and women are special because they're blessed.

Born in a good area and a good family.

Meeting good people.

Having rare talents, afforded opportunities to work hard–but looking at it logically, those things weren't special at all; they were commonplace affairs that happen all the time.

However deeply you read the trifling autobiography of a great person that's spread like a disease through bookstores, however faithfully you implement the lessons written inside, you can't replicate the same success–even if you vicariously experience the same things as that special person, it's not like you can become special yourself.

There are certainly rebellious people who can't adjust to society and end up committing crimes, despite being born in a good area, born in a good family, meeting good people, having rare talents, and being afforded opportunities to work hard.

Statistically, mathematically, they definitely exist.

When I talk about committing crimes, that would certainly be extreme and excessive cases, but that doesn't change the fact that most people just can't become special–so,

really, just when, where, and for what reason do special people become special people?

Perhaps, if an abject failure of a person like me is just a statistical anomaly on the low end of the scale–then are those men and women just statistical anomalies on the high end of the scale?

I could even think about it from the perspective of evolutionary biology–it might not be a statistical anomaly, but rather a genetic mutation.

Those men and women had been made special for no particular reason, but simply represented an advanced form of human existence–that's a bit of an exaggeration, but if I were to think of it like that, I could comprehend it just a little bit. I could restrain my raging inferiority complex.

I'd feel better if someone had told me sooner, clearly, that there was no particular reason for those anomalies–that I don't have to sympathize with the misfortune of misfortunate people, and that I shouldn't aspire to being special like special people are. Someone like me can be helped just by having someone reassuringly declare that.

Although, in my case, it might be better to describe myself as a malfunction instead of an anomaly… As a failed human who hasn't been disposed of yet, I have to watch out. I have to be careful.

Hitagi Senjougahara's special nature, Tsubasa Hanekawa's genetic evolution, and Koyomi Araragi's exceptionalism are all things that could only be found at Naoetsu

High School–those kinds of characters wouldn't appear in Shishikurasaki High School.

From now on, for the foreseeable future, the type of people I have to deal with are especially ordinary, overwhelmingly ordinary boys and girls like Amiko Yurugase.

007

I, Sodachi Oikura, am the embodiment of an inferiority complex, a problem child doubly troubled with servility and self-denial–and yet, I look upon everyone with hostility, and on top of that, I can viciously cast aside their individuality and human rights without batting an eye.

Looking at it objectively, I can only belong to the absolute lowest class of humanity–if I were somebody else, I would simply detest a person like me. Because even though I am myself, I still detest myself considerably. I have no doubt about that.

I hadn't intended to think badly of the isolated Amiko Yurugase, but I certainly hadn't anticipated some kind of optimistic outcome in which she welcomed me with open arms when I greeted her–however, I can't deny that that I'd thought it would be easier than when I'd first spoken to Hitagi Senjougahara.

Rather, I'd imagined it more like the time I squared off with Tsubasa Hanekawa–balancing out the possibilities like that, I'd found a way to ease the difficulty of the mission in my mind. Therefore, my struggle with Amiko Yurugase was likely due to my own weakness and my own fragility.

My own fragility, my own riskiness.

My own personality–that damn unpleasant thing.

Whenever people are appraised and ranked, my own place in the hierarchy would be that of a dog, wouldn't it.

That's why I was given the utterly charmless nickname "How Much". It was some kind of pun on my surname Oikura, but I suppose having people call me "Euler", after the mathematician I revere, is still just a dream within a dream, isn't it.

Well, being revered by someone like me is probably just bothersome to Euler-sensei–anyway, setting that aside, my greeting with Amiko Yurugase did not go well.

I don't want to say it, but it went about as badly as I could have imagined.

It's not like I "stuttered" like I did during my self-introduction–rather, I tried even harder not to. Even though I summoned up the guts required for someone like me to get to that point, when I started talking, curiously, the tension started increasing.

I fear the cruel battle I went through at Naoetsu High School may still be affecting me in evil ways. I hadn't noticed it, likely because I'd thought I'd attained extraordinary negotiation prowess–I was a fool for harboring such a delusion even for a moment.

Hm, actually, I don't think those days when I dealt with all those special people in succession were entirely useless. If it weren't for that, I wouldn't have come here in the first place–so, even if it's a tiny amount, I think I've grown just a little.

I didn't haughtily press her for a response, I didn't intend to deceive her, and with

reasonably honest words, I tried to get close to Amiko Yurugase.

With a modest, non-servile attitude.

But–she rejected my compromise.

She rejected it quite strongly.

It was a reaction I hadn't anticipated–since the situation could be seen by the rest of the class, I can't even begin to explain the enormous degree of embarrassment I felt at that time.

It's strange I didn't get violent.

Maybe that was because on top of feeling embarrassed, I was rendered dumb in mute amazement–anyhow, after ignoring me when I'd started talking, Amiko Yurugase had stood up in the middle of my speech and exited the classroom.

I was rejected in such a conspicuous manner.

I couldn't even believe how excessively flagrant it was–even if she was rejecting my conversation, surely there was a better way to do it.

When I'd approached Hitagi Senjougahara in the same way, she was content with casually engendering an atmosphere of, "Please don't speak to me, I like being alone"; as expected, it would be too much to request the same kind of thing now, but… even if she didn't like being spoken to, there should be at least one method of amicable rejection that didn't involve hurting me.

Why did she hurt me?

What was it, how to put it, ah…, it's a lot like me, isn't it. Falling into hysterics and

behaving irrationally, wrecking things–fragile, dangerous me.

Well, if I were her, I wouldn't have conscientiously returned to the classroom for the next lesson after break time was over (I might not have come back to school at all), but anyway, the phenomenon that really occurred was Amiko Yurugase running away from a transfer student's attempted conversation without so much as a glance.

Describing this chain of events from the point of view of a classmate, the transfer student had blundered through her self-introduction, tried to pursue friendship with an isolated classmate, and had her offer of fellowship rather harshly refused.

What a disgrace.

Since it was my first day as a transfer student, surely there was a limit to the degree of failure I could commit–maybe they'd written off my flubbed self-introduction, but I wonder if I was just covering for my failure with an even bigger failure.

As for why she did it, perhaps that girl knew of my evil ways at Naoetsu High School–that's the only reason I could think of for such a dramatic and extreme reaction.

She'd left that place, and tried to cut herself off from the years past, but even so, my multitude of unforgivable deeds were still etched into her mind–no, no, there's certainly no way that's true.

If that was the case, they wouldn't have been laughing when I stuttered through my

self-introduction. The class as a whole would have ostracized me as a social deviant from the start.

Since that sort of development hadn't occurred, that girl must have had her own reasons to run away.

Amiko Yurugase's own reasons.

…For some reason, when I put it in words it becomes fairly obvious; it was regrettable that I couldn't get my head around that before, but I was only thinking of her position in the classroom as a "state of isolation". I hadn't given more than a passing thought to the question of "why is she being isolated?" in the first place.

Just goes to show my ignorance of human relationships.

I felt ashamed, true, but I ought to feel especially ashamed of my lack of preparation in that regard; I was astounded, true, but I ought to feel especially astounded at my own rudeness.

Be ashamed, be astounded, die.

I looked at someone who was alone and carried out a superficial judgment like "Since it doesn't look like they have many friends, it'll be easy to make friends with them", so really, I'm the kind of person who should just die. Then, Araragi should just die. Die, Araragi!

There was no logical connection there, but I recovered my sense of tranquility just a little by envisioning Araragi's death; however, what I ought to have thought about before committing my huge failure was the

reason why a student would seem to not have many friends.

I'm not a great detective, and there's no way I can infer the answer just from a glance, but I should have been able to make a rough judgment that the reason a student doesn't seem to have many friends is very likely to be because it's difficult to make friends with them.

That's how it was with me, that's how it was with Araragi.

People who find it hard to make friends, and are hard to be friends with, can't really be called special; they can generally be found in great numbers–there would be nothing strange about Amiko Yurugase also being one of them.

I had approached and tried to become acquainted with her without realizing that, without it even occurring to me–it was just sinful.

If it's a sin to try to make friends with someone like that, then I've received sufficient punishment already–the label of "Tried to make a friend with everyone watching, and got turned down" will probably become a large obstacle in my life from now on. Blech.

Analyzing this calmly, there was nothing I could do–even if I'd pretended to be a tactician and try to work out a strategy, after all, I was feeling nervous about being at a new school, and had lost my balance after bungling my self-introduction.

It would have been better if I'd used my status as a transfer student to the maximum and just silently remained seated–if I did that, maybe a highly observant leader-like person would have started talking to me.

That's right. Seeing the transfer student nervous and thereby creating tension all around her would be a situation those boys and girls would try to resolve, so they'd take a keen interest in me.

They'd try to investigate in order to learn my true character; in that case, I'd hide my true self, and I'd be happy if I could have kept it hidden for a long time.

But that passive attitude isn't a part of my personality–taking action, and wanting to cut through times of trouble yourself; those are the courageous enterprises of special people, but for an incompetent like me, they're just dangerous bad habits.

That means that I'm unable to seek help when I need it–that's how I arrived to this point, by cleverly (and clumsily) slipping through the safety nets that had been laid out in this harmonious world.

Coming up with plans to help myself, and failing.

When I was in junior high, Araragi didn't save me–but now, I earnestly believe that if I hadn't taken that unnecessary course of action, contrary to what I'd expected at the time, things would have turned out differently.

If I were to say that my pride doesn't allow me to accept help from anyone, then that

would be quite a foolish pride indeed. If someone were to teach me how to be sensible about this, I'd take the initiative and abandon that line of thinking right away. However, a stylish line like 'protecting my pride means I can't protect myself as a person,' is something a special person would say.

…But, maybe, could Amiko Yurugase have thought like that as well? In other words, she saw the transfer student come up to talk with her, but it seemed more like jumping out at her–that is, wouldn't such improper behavior seem like a trap of some kind? And that might be what caused her to be cautious.

She was cautious about something. She was fighting something.

If I believed that sort of thing was foolish when someone other than me does it, if I thought about it with myself in their place, I wouldn't have that kind of serious survival strategy–but however amusing it is to think about, it's beside the point.

She and I are different people, and this was always just in my imagination. There might be a completely different reason why Amiko Yurugase ignored me and rushed out of the classroom.

For instance, one line of reasoning is that she simply disliked me–it should have been our first time meeting, but I can't rule out the possibility that I provoked a terrible grudge in her at some point before. Just like Araragi had completely forgotten about me, and moreover, appeared to have absolutely no

idea why I detested him so severely; I might have simply forgotten about her, too.

Since I have absolutely no faith in a person like me, it's hard to completely eliminate that possibility–well, I don't think it's very realistic, but I am a little suspicious of the time just after I'd transferred junior high schools, when I was particularly stubborn.

But, if I had the time to be fantasizing about that kind of miraculous reunion, I ought to be preparing an urgent plan to counteract the current situation.

If I blunder through the second half of my first day as a transfer student, I'd feel so disgraceful it'd be like my face was burning in shame. Before I pile any more shame on top of what I'm already suffering, I need to somehow figure out how to redeem my honor.

I won't say a ruined girl like me had any honor from the start, but if I resigned myself to this circumstance, I'd have no choice but to return from school like a soldier from a defeated army–it would be inexcusable to the Hakobe couple.

I have to do something.

Something.

…Pretending my masochistic feelings are actually somehow introspection, over and over, and in the end, repeating the same failures as always, is just the kind of person I am.

Here, what I ought to do is withdraw, not do anything unnecessary, and regain my posture–I'd been laughed at during my self-

introduction, and then had been publicly humiliated in front of yet another group of people.

But, if I just behave meekly, there should be some way this could help me. The flip side of getting rejected by an isolated student is successfully getting numbered among the majority. Even though that's a bit of a far-fetched argument, it's definitely something I could say.

Deeming Amiko Yurugase as an enemy, a so-called "common enemy", might make me join together with the rest of the class–but letting this chance slip away entirely would certainly show the true colors of career unfortunate Sodachi Oikura.

Eager to be liked by people, but trampling on their good will–that would be because, fundamentally, I don't really believe in good will. I've ended up thinking that it's hatred, much more than good will, that I can believe in.

Well, that's a way of speaking with a stylish air, an excuse with a stylish air, but even aside from that, I feel like I just can't go along with being a part of the majority, I feel like I just can't accept their pity. I'm overflowing with "little me's".

Creeping and crawling.

Trying to recover from my failures, those "little me's" will surely be the source of even more failure–although the herd of "little me's" all moved according to their own wishes, strangely, it had gathered up like an army.

52

This time, the point of attack they were aiming for, each and every one of them, was Amiko Yurugase, the isolated girl–really, then, for someone like me, I guess it can't be helped.

008

‘I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you, Oikura-san. I couldn’t reply to your kind words, because there was an unavoidable situation beyond my control. I won’t do something like that again, so please forgive me. If it’s not too late now, could we be friends? I’ll call you Sodachi from now on, okay? Actually, will you let me call you Euler, please?’

…Since I wanted Amiko Yurugase to confirm whether or not she was at fault, I just can’t help imagining stuff like that. For me, it’s unavoidable.

Having to keep company with a hopeless person like me for your whole life would surely be cruel and unusual punishment, I think–though, about that, surely there was just one person who could put up with me for at least one month.

It would make for an unpleasant memory, but there wouldn’t be any lasting damage, right?

But Amiko Yurugase didn’t even consider it. When I bravely approached her at the next break period, she ignored me again. It felt like we were walking down a road, and she kept ignoring the facecloth I was trying to give her–like she had briskly walked ahead of me, and bluntly declared, "I have no intention of having any association with you.” Like she was running helter-skelter away from me as I hounded her. Saying "helter-skelter” is almost like I’m trying to keep the damage to

my sullen, tattered heart to a minimum with a cutesy description, but actually, it would be more accurate to say she was “scattering in any and all directions like baby spiders”. She was just one person, but true to form as a baby spider, she wasn’t bothered by leaving me behind in pursuit–consequently, I got publicly humiliated once again, a third time, and a fourth time.

Well, speaking honestly, no matter what which time it was, if Amiko Yurugase had said even a single word to “deal with” me, I could have accepted that as the outcome and put an end to this whole thing.

Even if it’s not a success, if I could have experienced an outcome at all, I could give up–I would gallantly withdraw, change course and, as they say, look for a big tree when you need shelter.

But, even as the introvert I am, I’ve ended up coming too far to back out now. There’s no way I can lower this fist I’ve raised in the air.

No, if this situation persists, I’ll end up hitting myself in the head with my own fist–masochism and self-punishment and self-destruction and self-ruination.

Over and over and over and over and over.

Everything is self, self.

And it all becomes inconsequential–even if I could truly start over, my high-strung nature will make me abandon everything if even one small part of it goes wrong.

It’s like I’m the same as a clean-freak who throws clothes away if they get just a little

dirty–what a laughable thought, imagining someone as sullied as me as a clean-freak.

I've heard that people obsessed with cleanliness have a hard time keeping their rooms clean, contrary to what you might expect–since they don't want to get their own hands dirty, they can't clean up, and stuff–; if I'm a clean-freak, even though I ought to gallantly give up, I was being stubbornly particular about Amiko Yurugase.

Now that I think about it, I could say we're both making equally unpleasant memories; it was a situation in which both of us were intent on losing. What kind of mutual benefit had I been thinking of?

In the same way that I've been carrying on in a state of disgrace, at this point, it'd be fair to say I've been causing Amiko Yurugase a considerable amount of shame as well. According to Theater Troupe Oikura's comedic ad-libbing, that was something we would inevitably get involved in together, something we simply couldn't help but doing.[8]

Because, even for her, the choice to compromise with me and settle our relationship seemed like a good one; however, not once had she shown any sign of doing so.

In a state of communication failure, and having had nothing but one-sided conversations with her, we finally approached the end of school–in the plan I'd made this morning, I'd have found a companion; we'd have brought our desks

together and eaten lunch together, and we'd have made friends as she was showing me around after school… but this was a good time to recheck the pre-established harmony of that kind of idealistic pipe dream.[9]

I was alone when I transferred here, and I was still alone after school–even though I'm a third year, maybe I could try to join a club… It was a pitiful outcome, and I just wanted to escape from reality.

I couldn't show my face. East, west, south, north, I couldn't show my face anywhere.

I'd tried to show that damned Araragi that people could change, but I ended up showing him that they couldn't change–even being frowned upon by my entire class, I end up worrying more about being seen by Araragi, who isn't even here.

If Araragi were here, I'd gouge out both of the bastard's eyes, enough to despair of myself.

But, even so, I didn't give up (give up already!).

After school today was my last chance. Biting my lip, as soon as end-of-day homeroom was over, I rushed over to Amiko Yurugase's seat. It was the fifth time today I'd tried to talk to her–however, it was as if she had anticipated my movements in advance. At the point I'd turned around to look, she had disappeared.

My strategy to use my position as a transfer student to ask her to show me around the school had, with this, come to nothing–my goodness, I'd even thought I'd

forgive her for continuing to ignore me if she'd showed me around the school, and, even though I'd been shamelessly thinking I was doing her a favor here, with my personality growing more and more heinous… but this was already the fifth time she had run away from me, so I didn't just stand there dumbfounded.

Rather, because I'd just stood there dumbfounded the previous four times, I've had enough of looking like a fool–there's no next period to try again. I had no intention of being resigned to standing still.

I ran after her.

Given the situation, both the person herself and my classmates had probably started wondering why I was so fixated with Amiko Yurugase–in fact, as I might have expected, seeing me dash off carrying my bag, my classmates didn't laugh at all.

They saw me as a thoroughly strange person.

Quick-witted classmates surely might have suspected there was a connection between me and Amiko Yurugase in the past–but I'm sorry to say, that conjecture is wildly off the mark. If I were to speak of a fated partner with a past connection, in the end it would only be Araragi.

And so, although it naturally wasn't the same degree as Araragi, having been rejected so strongly over and over, I'd practically grown to hate Amiko Yurugase.

That intense indignation is what drove me to run.

Having her show me around after school, or possibly, going home from school together, wandering through town, even having tea, those kinds of idyllic plans were already gone from inside my head.

I'd even started feeling hostile, to the point where, if I caught up to her, I wanted to give her a remonstration and say, "That's enough already!"

I no longer intended to make friends with her, I simply wanted to forget my troubles and chase after her. Even if I said it was a malicious desire to cause trouble to Amiko Yurugase after she'd rejected me so completely that made me run, now that it's come to this, that might not actually be too far from the truth.

I want to thoroughly finish this affair.

But, with unexpected things, as always, I'm apt to struggle along with a fruitless effort; but just this one time, my approach did not wither, and at last had born fruit.

This was different from when I'd dealt with Araragi, Hitagi Senjougahara, or Tsubasa Hanekawa. It was a disappointing anticlimax, and I even felt maddeningly perplexed–around the stairway in the corridor I'd been running in, just like I thought, Amiko Yurugase's footsteps stopped.

Sternly crossing her slender arms in front of her chest, she was glaring at me aggressively–since I hadn't anticipated her "ambushing" me like that, as I might have expected, I faltered in the face of that piercing gaze.

It pierced me, and my feelings cooled down right away. Until a little while ago, I'd intended to pursue her to the ends of the earth, but now that I can catch up, I have no idea what I should do or what kind of face I should make.

By no means was I able to say something like "Enough already!"–objectively speaking, I was the one who needed to have that said to me.

But to me, being objective is even more difficult than turning into a bird or turning into a cat–maybe if it were turning into a dog, I could do it.

In a hierarchy of personal value, in the end, something that runs after things running away from it, actually, isn't that exactly what a dog is? Doesn't it feel like I've been chasing Amiko Yurugase around like a dog that wants to play with a toy? If something happens that it doesn't like, regardless of where it is or who it's with, it snaps at them; a stray dog, or if I don't choose my words carefully, a mad dog…, if a dog like me got emotionally attached to someone and forced them to play chase, it would be natural for a person like Amiko Yurugase to come greet me with a very angry expression–had she finally run out of patience? Rather, it might be better to say she was putting up with me quite well until now. Since she'd been able to endure being followed around by someone like me for a whole business day, perhaps, this isolated girl had a better personality than I'd thought… My head had cooled down quite a

bit, and I started vaguely thinking like that, however.

'Yutheya.' Hearing that low, threatening voice, I suddenly came to my senses–hm? What? Huh? 'You dare?' Well, I was thinking I might have caused her some trouble. But 'you dare,' hm. What was that? She was angry, was that what it meant? Something like, 'How dare you follow me around all day?' Or, is that really what she said just now? She said 'how dare you?' Such a scathing vilification?

'What the hell aya doin, ya slow in the head?–you theah.'

When she repeated it, I understood. Not 'you dare', but 'you theah', then–it was hard for me to understand because of the accent, but she wasn't insulting me, it was just a form of address. Wait, though, isn't 'slow in the head' clearly an insult?

But in this area's dialect, that might be an expression to praise how small my head was compared to my body, so I couldn't thoughtlessly fly into a rage. It'll be hard for me to live if I always jump to the wrong conclusion and take any and all words directed at me as attacks. I can't just take words at face value, I have to read between the lines–though if I draw out the nuance, even that "you theah" contained plenty of ill will, at least in my estimation.

'Even though I was obviously avoidin people, what the hell, you theah, ahya actually insane?'–if I turned that round and round in my head, it was like Amiko Yurugase, while glowering at me, was bluntly

saying in her fluid accent that she hadn't really been ignoring me and refusing to speak with me.

…I couldn't speak very eloquently either, but contrary to her fragile appearance, Amiko Yurugase was a gruff speaker.

Well, no, since I'm not used to hearing her speak, I could be interpreting her as ruder than she really was, and it's obviously the dialect of this area; but, I had no experience in my life of being able to cope with an unfamiliar climate and culture.

To the point where if possible, I'd want an interpreter.

My head filled with self-centered thoughts, I ended up unconsciously thinking something like that, and it made me realize once again how thoroughly foreign I was to this place, as a transfer student.

'Come eeyeh.'

With that, without waiting for me to reply, Amiko Yurugase beckoned with her hand and started to go up the stairway–if we were leaving the school, we clearly would be going down the stairs, but in going up, it appeared that she was sparing some time to talk to me.

If we'd had a conversation here, we'd soon be running into the rest of the class, so it wasn't a strange idea to move to a different location.

However, there was room for consideration as to whether I should nonchalantly follow her movements–somehow or other, I'd felt a sense of danger from Amiko Yurugase's demeanor, so even

moving in the opposite direction was not a strange idea either. I think that might even be the proper choice here.

If I were dealing with this properly, I ought to withdraw–speaking of which, it would likely be the adult decision to pull away at this time.

It would be the adult decision, the right course of action, the most lady-like solution–but even so, in this situation, I was unable to betray the expectations of all the people who believed that I couldn't make the adult decision, that I couldn't take the right course of action, and that I couldn't choose the most lady-like solution.

It wasn't because I wanted to know.

Why did Amiko Yurugase seem to have been avoiding me–and why she was being isolated in the class… It wasn't because I wanted to learn about her situation.

Honestly, I didn't want to get involved with something like that.

As someone who only thinks about herself, I don't have even one millisecond to spare for thinking of other people–there was only enough space in my heart to despise that detestable man to the utmost.

Don't misunderstand; truly, I haven't the slightest bit of interest in Amiko Yurugase–nevertheless, the reason I was going after Amiko Yurugase after she said something that I daresay meant, "Follow me," was that if I didn't, it would seem like I'd gotten scared and run away.

If I'd simply turned my back on her now, there's no way that could really be 'running away', and even if I did run, it wouldn't be running to escape but rather to seek refuge; but even though I acknowledged that in my head over and over, I began walking toward the stairway.

Like I'm wading into the muddy rivers of hell.

009

Now that I think about it, the reason why I chose such a foolish course of action might have been because the dialect had confused me; as a paltry excuse, this was the first time in my life that I encountered such a dialect.

When I'd transferred junior high schools, I didn't go as far away as this, so I'd never had the experience of being bewildered by small differences in words–though of course, strictly speaking, the same words I used every day were still included in other dialects.

Even so-called "standard language" is, at its root, really just the dialect of a single region–that it's the "correct way to speak" is something of a collective illusion.

I ought to keep in mind that it's my way of speaking that's the minority in this community–to me, Amiko Yurugase's way of speaking sounds rude (even allowing for any of her ill intentions), but to locals like her and the rest of the class, my way of speaking might be taken as a refusal to adjust to the area.

They'd snickered at me during my self-introduction, but even if I was able to get through it without stuttering, I might have still been laughed at after all–I suppose, as teenagers, they hadn't gotten many opportunities to hear a real live outsider's strange way of speaking.

It might be better to be thought of as a laughing stock than as a suspicious transfer

student–but because of all the failures I keep committing, at this point, I've ended up turning even that "silver lining" meaningless.

I must be a prodigy at letting good fortune go to waste.

This might still be part of that cliched "Look, it's the transfer student!" reaction, but as I followed Amiko Yurugase up the staircase, it started to feel a bit like "disciplining the newcomer".

If that's the case, then could the reason for Amiko Yurugase's isolation in the class be that she's a delinquent? I couldn't say anything certain based on that short exchange just now, but this girl seemed to have a strong spirit, and on top of that, she seemed to be strong-willed; so that might be a perfectly realistic guess.

If that's the case, I've ended up accidentally making the choice to "become a member of the delinquent group" (though it wasn't really a group), but if that's the outcome, if I say so myself, it doesn't seem to be something I can praise myself for–rather, I want to reprimand myself.

Such a professional I am, making this kind of mistake.

Was I even aiming to be successful in the first place.

Setting aside the good and the bad of trying to curry favor with a powerful delinquent, it was a perfectly reasonable way of making one's way in the world, but after I've almost made her hostile, since I can hardly claim to know what she's thinking… I

can't even make my way through a puddle, can I.

Maybe she's gonna hit me. I don't want that.

I don't like violence, but I don't like having problems on my first day as a transfer student even more–regulations are probably more lax here than at a private school, but even at a public school you can get expelled and such.

Judging from what happened with Hitagi Senjougahara, perhaps I can keep my injuries to a minimum if I pretend to faint after being hit once, and I can try to get through this using that sort of technique…, though I don't think I have the acting talent to pull that off.

I might be able to play dead, though–I do already look like something that's dead.

While I was giving in and letting anxiety take me over, I finished climbing the stairs–we'd arrived on the roof of the school.

It was my first time in such a place, since the roof at Naoetsu High School had been off-limits–however, the scenery spread out before me here was different in some aspects to my mental image of a "school roof".

It was artificial grass of course, but the whole area seemed to have been made into a lawn, and surrounding the whole roof was a fence so tall it seemed impossible to climb over.

First of all, it seemed hard to commit suicide by jumping off the school here… My impression of it was less like a fall prevention

fence and more like the inside of a cage at a zoo.

It wasn't just on the edges of the building; looking up at the sky, a fine mesh netting had been strung up overhead… did the administrators of this school think that teenage kids were liable to fly up into the sky?

No, that's not it.

The netting had been placed there so that students could play ball on the roof– somehow, it really felt like a city school.

But then, as far as I could tell, nobody was on the roof after school, and it was difficult to say that this valuable dead space was being effectively utilized–though they probably had never anticipated it being used as a place to summon a transfer student.

But she had done so, and with her back turned to me, Amiko Yurugase said, 'You theah, what ahya tryin to do–ya want somethin from me? It's not hahd to see I was avoidin people, so why ahya so pehsistant, eeh?', and, rattling on in her strong accent, honestly, I had absolutely no idea what she was saying.

I was preoccupied with being on an unfamiliar roof, and I was also inexperienced with this dialect, but even before considering those things, she was just speaking too quickly for me to properly follow her.

If I were to cruelly misinterpret the situation, I might say that right now, Amiko Yurugase was feeling the same kind of tension I was–if I thought the shrillness of

her voice indicated something like that, then this might turn out to be different than the stereotypical, “delinquent trying to knock some sense into an incautious transfer student who can’t read the atmosphere”.

If I were unversed in the ways of delinquents, that is.

Well, if that’s the case now, if someone were to inquire as to just what kind of situation I had gotten into, I couldn’t answer even if I thought about it… but then again, only thinking won’t help my situation much.

Or perhaps I should say, I’m concerned that I’ll seem defiant if I get too lost in thought–and it’s not like it’s been settled that Amiko Yurugase isn’t really a short-tempered, violent problem child.

Sucking up to a delinquent student wouldn’t be entirely impossible for me, but even so, I’ve decided that I need to do whatever I can, so, facing Amiko Yurugase, I said something to the effect of, 'Have I done something to annoy you?’ Since I don’t know what I might blurt out I speak imprudently and get fired up, I tried to talk as plainly as possible.

Confronted with that, Amiko Yurugase’s reply was something like, 'Don’t bullshit me, you wanna get dragged into this, idiot?’–her accent had slowed down a little, but that said, I wasn’t confident I was hearing her properly because of her rough way of talking. “Idiot”? Has anyone ever called me that to my face in my whole life?

Since Amiko Yurugase still had her back to me, strictly speaking she didn't say it to my face, but from her tone of voice, it was like I was able to see through to her facial expression with 100% clarity.

I was picturing a very angry face.

But, while trying to have a conversation with her back turned, her posture was less of a posture and looked more like a pose for some reason; somehow, it even seemed as if she was enraptured in herself–like a narcissist.

Since I was the same way, more or less, that's what I thought.

Speaking of which, even when she had ambushed me with arms crossed near the stairway, there seemed to be a touch of stage acting, almost theatricality about it.

For better or for worse, it lacked the unquestionable intensity of a real actor, but that coarse imitation gave rise to a different kind of intensity.

…But, well, after I've misread her so many times, I can't rely upon my own estimation– "How Much" wasn't a nickname I liked in the first place, but it was much too high of an evaluation of my half-baked appraisal ability.

Anyway, however it might look, this *was* the conversation I'd desperately desired.

A tete-a-tete between us two.

It was altogether different from what I'd expected, but it was a back-and-forth with Amiko Yurugase–let's continue the race.

We should be able to get over the language barrier with facial expressions and body

language–however, I could see her back, but she couldn't see me at all. 'Look at me!' I wanted to shout.

'Whah…?' Amiko Yurugase turned around–telepathy? No, that's not it. I'd wanted to shout something, and somehow, it looked like I'd ended up shouting it.

Impulsively.

Damn, my self-control is faltering–I'm unable to endure this stressful situation, and things have stopped making sense. It's like I'm losing control over myself.

At worst, if she gets violent, I might be able avoid getting in trouble if I'm purely the victim, but if I end up as the aggressor, to say nothing of the possibility of us both getting caught fighting, I would get expelled, no joke. If things went badly, it might even be a matter for the police, as they say…

But, you can't take back words once they've left your mouth, and on account of Amiko Yurugase's relentless staring, it was even more difficult to apologize. Because instead of saying 'I apologize,' I said, 'I apolallies.' Well, I maybe I was trying to get through this by becoming allies with her; no, I don't know what I was trying to do. Sure enough, Amiko Yurugase said, 'Hauh…?' and made a deliberately puzzled face–moving closer, it appeared all the more menacing.

Even this looks like bit like acting.

If she's trying to "perform" to encourage herself, she's putting a little too much effort into the performance–it's so theatrical.

I'm in no position to talk about other people, though.

I can't even say, "I'm sorry."

'Talkin to me right away on ya fehst day,' Amiko Yurugase got right to the point. Her face was so close I could feel the air exhaled when she spoke. 'How am I suppozed to take that?–ah you makin fun of me?' As I thought, if I looked at her face directly, I could provide some degree of translation for that quarrelsome manner of speaking. Facial expressions are important–eyes are windows to soul. My own eyes looked too dead to be windows to the soul, but it worked for what Amiko Yurugase was trying to say–though, having said that, I understood her this time.

I was making fun of her?

If I were pressed for an answer to that, well, although it was involuntary, I suppose I might have been making fun of her–rather than involuntary, it might be more accurate to say 'subconsciously'; or rather, it might be closer to the cruel truth of the matter to say that I just wasn't mindful of how I was acting.

I had vividly imagined that even as a transfer student unaccustomed to the area, it would easy to deal with a student who seemed isolated in their class, that I could compromise with her from an upper position, that I could extend a hand.

Rebuked for such a despicable pan, I succumbed to a dreadful level of shame. For me, that kind of shame can easily lead directly into rage–I want to rebut, 'Do you

even have a heart?' for relentlessly torturing a wretched, pitiful person like me.

Such a pathetic mind.

Since I understood that about myself (I do understand it!), I devoted my entire being, mobilizing all of all the parts of my body to somehow remain silent–almost like I was weathering the storm by ignoring Amiko Yurugase's overpowering words.

Even if it turns out that she takes offense to being ignored, it's quite ironic that this time I'm the one ignoring her.

But what I need right now is mindful self-restraint.

No, with my type of mind, should I call it mindless self-restraint?

Well, since it would be awkward to be completely silent, I threw in some noises of acknowledgment every so often, but in my heart, I was thinking, "I hope this is over soon"–I was very reluctant to say any words of apology, but I couldn't even put on a remorseful facial expression.

'I get it, so please let me go home.'

That's what I was brazenly implying (despite the fact I didn't 'get it' at all), however, while I was getting more and more fed up, the wind's direction seemed to change–since I was desperately trying to suppress my overflowing self-consciousness, and I was letting Amiko Yurugase's words essentially go through one ear and out the other, it was a mystery as to just where the conversation had flowed. Now she was explaining to me how the current leader of

the class was a girl called Suzubayashi, and how Kyakufuji was a nice girl who'd probably be kind to me, and how most things would go well if I made a boy called Hashimura my ally.

Even after realizing that, I felt like I couldn't understand what she was saying at all, but somehow it felt as though Amiko Yurugase was giving me a lecture about everyone in the class.

She was giving me a detailed explanation of things like the class hierarchy, how interpersonal relationships were organized, and the network of the class ecosystem. Who was in which situation, who had what personality, which established groups held influence, and finally, who was going out with whom, who were ex-boyfriends and ex-girlfriends… In her rough tone, Amiko Yurugase was giving me a careful and thorough explanation of all sorts of particulars I honestly didn't want to know.

And yet, if they're disclosed to me all at once, I couldn't really get a handle on the profiles of all 40 classmates–I wasn't even certain about everyone's names yet. I could barely remember which students had unusual names, or which students had the same names as friends of mine from long ago.

This was surely an instance of communication failure, but once I set aside the issue of my lack of understanding, isn't this almost as though I'm having Amiko Yurugase give me advice as a transfer student?–no, that's exactly what it was.

If I listened closely to what she was saying, and wrote it all down in a memo, it would seem to be quite a bit of information that would help me survive the next month. More than that; if I were a person who was skilled in the ways of the world and I'd met a girl I could naturally get alone with, this was personal information I couldn't have figured out in just one month–and I wouldn't even want to figure out scandalous details like who was intimate with whom in the first place.

But, being aware of that, the reason I can't really bring myself to take a memopad out of my bag is that I'm still quite uneasy about why Amiko Yurugase was giving me all of this information–this should be a one-sided denunciation of my impetuous foolishness as a transfer student, but why in the world was I receiving such charity?

Contrary to what her rude behavior would suggest, maybe Amiko Yurugase was actually a nice, helpful person, overflowing with human kindness–though I'm not the kind of docile person who would accept something like that. I don't recognize the existence of people who are "actually nice".

Rather, it was truly more natural for me to believe that Amiko Yurugase was trying to push a nuisance like me onto some other classmate.

I could readily accept that while Amiko Yurugase's lecture felt caring, the underside was that she just saw dealing with a transfer student as bothersome.

It was like she was saying, “Get away from me,” but was indicating my destination, and on top of handing me a road map, she had given me detailed navigation instructions; so, well, thinking about it normally, I ought to treat this as a conclusion to the whole affair.

A conclusion, and a turning point.

I ought to show my gratitude and say thank you to Amiko Yurugase, return to the class, and start talking to people like So-and-so Suzubayashi, Whoever Kyakufuji, and What’s-it Hashimura-kun–we’d spent a very long time here, but maybe at least one person was remaining in the classroom.

I’d bungled up the order of my shirt buttons, but now was the time to press the reset button, as it were–it’s a chance to start over. *Ufufu, whom shall I befriend tomorrow, I wonder?*

Sodachi Oikura, the woman who could never think like that.

I can’t make the right choices, and if my reasoning is sound, I start doubting myself even more–I know a troublesome transfer student like me will just get pushed onto somebody else.

If I were in their position, I’d probably do the same. You think I could treat every stranger kindly when I can barely do the same for myself?–I know how painful that feeling is. After all, high school third years are busy with studying for entrance examinations.

But even though I said “if I were in their position, I’d do the same,” I must say it would

be quite dubious as to whether I could actually do something like that.

Why? Because I'd have no clue who I should push the transfer student onto–as a girl of the lowest rank of humanity, I'd have absolutely no idea what kind of personalities my classmates had.

If I had known that, even a little, I wouldn't have held that classroom trial–and as a result, I wouldn't have been exiled so miserably, and I wouldn't have drifted all the way here to Shishikurasaki High School.

So, if this was the point of conclusion, then that was the point of doubt.

Why did Amiko Yurugase have such a detailed grasp of the class's personal information? Why did her knowledge reach even the most meager things, like everyone's idiosynrasies, power relationships, and interests?

I could only see it as strange.

Rather than call it strange, I'd have to say it was questionable–as a transfer student, I probably can't say there's anything odd about her knowing things about her classmates, but that's not the point I find dubious.

If she's carrying that kind of valuable information around, then shouldn't she be able to execute a plan by herself? That's what I was thinking.

Even with just that detailed of a map of influence within the class, she shouldn't be isolated–the biggest factor in my very own isolation was my ignorance of and indifference to other people. In other words,

if you're interested in other people, and you know things about other people, you can't really be isolated–even if you wanted to be. Even if, like me, your ideas about other people were simply prejudicial notions, it's be hard to believe that you could talk about the personalities of nearby people if you were in a state of estrangement and isolation.

On the other hand, it was also hard to believe that Amiko Yurugase had made up a bunch of lies on the spot. Although it's valid as an explanation of the situation, it's not very realistic to imagine that she had recited that much false information in order to drive me away.

I felt that the fabrication prowess needed to come up with so many lies that resembled the truth like that was just too high–to forge 40 pieces of personal information, no matter how you look at it, was a just little too eccentric to be believed.

It's something a special person would do.

I'd need to verify just how accurate all of that information was, but I couldn't believe that all of it was made up–*Shut up, Oikura, just what are you thinking about, what are you stewing about in that whiny little dim-witted head of yours; whatever you're thinking about is bound to be wrong anyway, so just obediently receive this blessing, idiot,* I seemed to hear Araragi's voice saying.

…I know Araragi's isn't saying that.

It's just that whenever I need a dissenting opinion to make me think carefully, I can only have it voiced by the Araragi inside of me–

opposing Araragi is the energy that moves me.

Amiko Yurugase was shouting at me from a short distance away, but the voice of Araragi in my fantasy echoed stronger within me, full of intense discomfort, full of deep, acrid pain.

Whatever kind of stressful situation I find myself in, sending my mental image of Araragi flying with a punch clears my head to a certain extent–and the pressure I was feeling from Amiko Yurugase was nothing too significant.

That said, it's not like the Araragi inside of me will help me out of this dilemma. Well, it doesn't seem like Amiko Yurugase is going to get violent with me, so the situation right now isn't the worst it could be, but…

Even so, I couldn't sweep away my suspicions about just what she was planning to do. Just like how I see everyone as an enemy, everyone sees me as an enemy, and they're planning to hurt me if they get a chance… that's going beyond misanthropy onto the level of megalomania (would tricking someone like me yield a benefit for anyone?), but even so, this just doesn't sit right with me.

Just looking at the outcome, thanks to Amiko Yurugase, I could grasp aspects of the classmates to my right and my left whom I hadn't known anything about before, to a certain extent… however, after listening thoroughly to her machine-gun talk, in the end, I couldn't say any words of gratitude.

I didn't contrarily press her with something like, 'What are you trying to do, are you making fun of me?', but I was likely honest with what I said–my mentality that had instantaneously felt opposition to her self-assertive good will might have calmed down just from catching sight of a point of doubt.

A point of doubt.

If I laid it out it simply, it was something like, 'Why don't you use that information to help your current state of isolation.' However, she didn't seem happy with my lack of gratitude; I was threatened with a, 'What's with that look.' Certainly, I hadn't given her so much as a good reaction, but I'm bothered by that complaint about my facial expression. This is the same face I've always had. Direct the complaints to my parents, please–though, I don't have parents anymore.

Like she had given up on ungrateful, rebellious me, at long last, Amiko Yurugase looked away from me. Since our cheeks had almost come close enough to be on the verge of touching, I honestly felt relieved.

My personal space was "a distance where arms and legs can't reach me", so even though we'd separated to a small extent, my interpersonal stress hadn't completely disappeared–since I feel pressure whenever I face someone, frankly speaking, it would have helped tremendously if I could have kept looking at her back like earlier.

I can't really say that (even if it weren't me, there's no way anyone could say

something like, “Talk with your back to me, please,”), however, at least Amiko Yurugase had heard half of my request.

Was it telepathy again (or rather, had I flared up and accidentally said it out loud again)? But although I had gotten flustered, that’s not what it was–having said everything she wanted to say, it seemed that Amiko Yurugase intended to turn back, leave me on the roof, and go home.

No no no, wait up, does she mean to end it in such an incomplete fashion? I tried to detain her, but on the spur of the moment, I couldn’t think of how to address her (Yurugase-san? Would using 'san’ make her feel self-conscious? Would Yurugase-chan seem overly friendly? Should I not use honorifics? Would that be overly friendly in itself? Moreover, in my mental state, would I end up flubbing an unfamiliar name? Was her name even Amiko Yurugase in the first place? Jumble jumble jumble jumble), so I had no choice but to resign myself to watching her leave in silence.

Ugh, such a helpless feeling.

I’d been told everything I wanted to hear, and she said everything she wanted to say; I certainly might have had good opportunities, but I couldn’t say anything I wanted to say, and couldn’t help but feel indigested, like I failed to achieve a good result–I ended up embracing the gloom.

It had quite won me over, in a rough, overbearing manner.

However, originally, I'm not sure I really had anything I wanted to say–the reason I'd been so particular about Amiko Yurugase was because she had ignored me.

And it made me angry.

I hadn't wanted to recognize my own bad decision to talk to her first; I was just obstinately coming to grips with the death of my expectations–I couldn't say I had anything like a sense of purpose. If anything, what I had wasn't a sense of purpose, but a sense of being victimized.

I can't forgive her for ignoring me when I was toughening up and trying my best–I could say that Amiko Yurugase just couldn't put up with my brand of selfishness.

She didn't eat lunch together with me, and she didn't even give me a tour of the school, but to make up for it, she'd given me this information–this is a harsh way of saying it, but no matter what the circumstances were, now that it's come to this, I could say she's served her purpose.

…It really is a harsh way of saying it, isn't it.

But, that's not what I'm saying, that's what the person herself is saying–since she knew she'd been given the role of stepping stone, she would probably warn me not to get involved with her any further.

I won't say I hadn't really intended to use her as a stepping stone–the unshakeable truth was that I'd started talking to her as my first step, or perhaps as a bridge, for me to blend into the class.

However, even if it had gone according to plan and I'd started fitting in in the class, and I could say I had no intention of casting Amiko Yurugase aside, it'd be hard to believe–or I should say, if I were her, since I have a strong persecution complex, I would definitely interpret it that way.

'You just talked to me because you wanted me to introduce our classmates, right?' and–'Yes, yes, so this is fine,' I'd reply.

'It's not like you had any interest in me, right?'

My shoulders fell, and I let out a big sigh.

Just like that, I could no longer support the weight of my body; I crouched down on the artificial grass, and buried my face in my knees–my arms clasped around my legs. The skirt of my brand-new uniform will probably get dirty, but I didn't care.

I wonder, hm…, for instance if, here…, if there was a tightly packed plastic bag of food waste…, it's translucent, so you can see about 70 liters of garbage inside…, and Sodachi Oikura-chan, alias 'me,' was standing next to it…, if you asked anyone, "Hmm, which one should I talk to?", really, really, really, I'm such a hopeless lowlife that they wouldn't hesitate to choose the garbage bag.

In that situation, choosing me would be unnatural unless you were at least as much of an eccentric as Araragi–but, while that may be true, the only one who truly cannot forsake me, is me.

If I were anyone else, I'd be the first thing they'd cast away, but I am me–what would I do if I didn't protect myself?

No matter what they say to me, I won't lose heart.

I'd just crouched down, but I stood up right away–let's change the subject. I'll at least consider everything settled with Amiko Yurugase.

Aah, I'm not half bad!

It turned out all right!

I minimized the amount of interaction I'd had to have with Amiko Yurugase, who, while not quite as much as me, seemed to have a considerably troublesome personality. Rather, couldn't you call that doing well as a transfer student? Isn't this what they call taking a loss to earn a profit?

Even if I earned a profit, I felt like I hadn't earned it virtuously, but if I thought about this as letting Amiko Yurugase get away without getting involved with a dishonorable person like me, I could even feel like I'd done a good thing.

Why, haven't we both just done good things for each other? Ufufu, it feels good to do something good–somehow or other, in a way I couldn't have imagined, that rallied my spirits, and I rallied my body.

As I thought, my skirt was wrinkled, but compared to the wrinkles etched into my forehead, that was an insignificant matter–I've grown accustomed to it, I think.

Now then, it's gotten quite late, but I ought to make use of this information I've obtained;

before I leave the school, why don't I return to the classroom for a little while…, perhaps I can chat my way into a friendly group.

If anyone's staying behind, they're exam students, and they're not just chatting, they're probably having a study group… 'Study group' is a sequence of words that horrifies me almost as much as 'Koyomi Araragi', but even if that's the case, I'll endure it with an effort, I'll hold back my goosebumps, and I'll participate, enough to show them how magnanimous I am.

Studying is my specialty. Moreso than people.

Although it was too late, as I descended the stairway, I hit upon a thought: Amiko Yurugase went so far as to sell out her classmates' personal information in order to reject me, wasn't it because she felt the same way as I did?–though it's surely too late for that now.

I couldn't understand her very well due to the accent, but it seemed she'd said things like, "Even though I was avoiding people," and "Do you want to get dragged into this?" at the beginning of our talk.

For me, it wasn't an excessive excuse, but in her case, she might have been thinking with kindness in her heart, "I ought not to get involved with a troublesome person like me," and had therefore ignored me.

It's not necessarily out of the question.

Having said that, there are many times I've been isolated in my life, but it's not as if I've never rejected other people for reasons like

that–if isolation is thinking that being by yourself is adequate, then it's natural to reject other people entirely. Ending friendships for the sake of your friends. Is there something bad about having that kind of dramatic event in my life?

So even if Amiko Yurugase had shown me the way for my sake, so that I wouldn't get dragged into her own isolation, there's nothing wrong with that either–it was a sequence of campus drama that was easy to see, that the transfer student, not knowing much about the class, would end up inadvertently affiliating with a very bad group, and afterward would find it difficult to lead a proper youth.

Being isolated is being fine by yourself.

Well, that's still intoxication, but… looking back on my life, I think I *can* get drunk on just solitude; however, *I'm not askin' you to try to sound cool, I know, I know, do what you want to protect your pride,* I wouldn't go so far as to think that.

If that's the case, I'd suddenly start worrying about her reasons for isolation–though, well, I suppose that's a lie. Since I'm garbage even below the level of food waste, I can't worry about the circumstances of other people.

I arrived in front of the classroom after walking down the corridor, and that rumination vanished like mist. No matter how serious Amiko Yurugase's mysterious situation seemed to be, my own silly and trivial concerns were much more important,

much more urgent, and exceedingly more precious to me.

Of course, for an egoistical girl like me, it's not like I'm expecting it to be smooth sailing from here on; even though I gathered my courage and opened the door, there was nobody in the classroom. It was as if I could hear an "emptiness" sound effect.

I felt like my resolve to participate in a study group was just a convenient, shameful delusion, and I was about to fall onto my knees once again, but I resisted–if I fell on my knees in a place that wasn't astroturf, my kneecaps might break.

But I received unexpected damage from this admittedly pre-ordained strikeout, and I didn't feel like leaving right away; just like that, I entered the classroom–I didn't head for my assigned seat, but went instead toward the teacher's desk.

It might have looked like I was thinking that even someone like me could make a proper self-introduction in an empty classroom, but now that I'm standing here, as soon as I saw the empty classroom, I realized how foolish this was. Trying to redo my self-introduction after school in an uninhabited classroom was not sane behavior–I'm glad I came to my senses before doing something like that.

I don't think there's any meaning in revising my self-introduction. It'd be better to prepare for tomorrow's lessons–it's just that looking out from where I was standing, where I'd made my self-introduction that

morning, I thought I'd finally be able to take in the scenery of the classroom into which I'd transferred.

Since no one was there, it was natural that I would be able to see every little corner of the room, but just like before, I felt nervous, and realized I couldn't really see anything–I couldn't see anything but Amiko Yurugase, and I couldn't think about anything but that girl. The rest was me despising Araragi. Hate Araragi hate Araragi hate Araragi.

That narrow outlook is not normal.

No, it's not my outlook that's narrow, but the capacity of my mind–even when I'm dealing with a great number of people, I can't face them at all. How dare I somehow serve as a class representative at Naoetsu High School with that mentality. There's a world of difference between me and Tsubasa Hanekawa.

With such narrow-mindedness, and such a myopic way of seeing things, I'm someone who can't stand above people no matter what. Even if I stood below people, I'd bring at least as much trouble to the people standing above me–I'd even hesitate to stand upwind of people, let alone above them.

What's the right way for someone like me to keep on living? I can't imagine there's a correct route, and even if there were, I probably couldn't follow it anyway–but there really shouldn't be anything like that for someone like me.

I wonder how everyone else does it.

Making the same failures over and over, knowing the right thing to do but being unable to do it, always having the same problems, just how would they keep on living?–well, by making the same failures over and over, knowing the right thing to do but being unable to do it, and always having the same problems, I suppose.

It definitely seems hard to get along with such people.

I couldn't be bothered to let out a shout–now, no matter what classroom I'm in, even if it's an empty classroom after school, for a girl immersed in thought by herself, I can spare no words.

What, am I pretending to live out my youth here?

Well, that's enough of that, I'll go home and study.

I'll lie to the Hakobe couple and say I'm feeling good and having fun at this school–if I can just execute that mission, I can treat this day today as a success. If I indulge in some self-injurious behavior and spoil myself with a loose self-evaluation, I should be able to relax just a little.

I'll try my best tomorrow.

I didn't have the right state of mind today. Today was my fault.

Tomorrow will also be my fault, but trying my best is no crime–as I was telling myself that, when I went to leave the classroom, I suddenly noticed something inconsequential.

Since it was inconsequential, it wasn't worth worrying about; but I'd realized it all

by myself, so it seemed to me like the biggest discovery of the century. I was seized by a delusion that this discovery could change my life on a grand scale.

I'm not exactly a detective in a mystery novel, and it's highly unlikely that something like the Copernican revolution would happen based on just a single discovery, that the situation would take a 180 degree turn and instantly be resolved–it was inconsequential, an utterly trivial realization.

It's a non-issue, the number of desks.

I like math, and I have a habit of counting things–to elaborate (though, I'm sure you wouldn't want to know many details about me), when I see things that are lined up systematically, I end up wanting to count them.

Counting the number of columns and the number of rows, I produce the total number by multiplying–well, this is just me failing to cast away a childish habit, but compared with how bad my personality is, I can't really call it much of a bad habit.

So, somehow, I subconsciously had counted all the desks lined up in the classroom–but for some reason, the total number of desks didn't match up with the total number of students in the class.

Hmm?

Well, is that alright then?

Because I'd just transferred, of course the numbers wouldn't match–no, even so, that's not it. There were originally 41 people in the class, a prime number, when I'd nonchalantly

transferred; in other words, I'd been under the impression that the current total population of the class was 42 people, but, if I took the 7 columns, multiplied it by the 6 rows, and added the remaining 1, I'd get 43 desks…, a prime number.

Well, it doesn't matter whether it's a prime number now.

That's not it…, since there weren't really any classes at Naoetsu High School with more than 40 people, it didn't come to me intuitively, but what does it mean for there to be a 43rd desk in a class that purportedly has 42 people in total?

…I had a bit of a bad feeling about this; however, it was a dull sense of discomfort. There's no doubt a special person like Tsubasa Hanekawa would have hit upon an even greater, unforeseen discovery in this ordinary classroom at this ordinary school; but it appears that all someone like me, who isn't even good enough to be called ordinary, can do is to be picky about this sort of thing.

Nevertheless, tilting my head in doubt, I thought I might have counted incorrectly, or was misunderstanding something, so I repeated the calculation several times. While I was doing that, I realized there was a seating chart taped down on the teacher's desk with cellophane tape.

Aah, so there was something like that.

Well, that was for the teacher; setting aside taking attendance during homeroom, the teacher wouldn't be able to remember every single one of the students' names in the

middle of teaching a lesson from their curricula–moreover, since the class exceeded 40 people, there was all the more reason to have something like this. It was a big number of students, given the declining birth rates nowadays, but more than that, it was a class size that made me think the number of teachers might be diminishing–without something like this, it's unlikely the teacher would be able to call on particular students during class.

Looking at it, even though I'd just transferred, my name "Oikura" was written on the seating chart–did they really make a brand new chart because of me? Strange; seeing my name on the list like this, even someone like me seems like just another member of the class.

Anyway, when I compared the seating chart with the desks that had been lined up in the classroom, I hit upon the reason for my bad feeling–well, calling it a reason would be an exaggeration, since it was a rather trifling issue in the first place.

Put simply, there was one student absent from class today–I hadn't realized, because I was nervous when I made my self-introduction, and after that I hadn't been able to think about anything but Amiko Yurugase, but originally, there were 42 students in this class.

I was the 43rd student.

My doubts quickly melted away, but now that I've figured that out, I wanted to be

certain about the details–who was the absent person?

It was tough to distinguish between boys and girls based on just the surnames written on the seating chart, but now I had all of my classmates' personal information given to me by Amiko Yurugase–if I reinforced my indistinct memory with those clues, I should be able to narrow down where the empty seat was to some extent.

Feeling like I wanted to know who was absent wasn't due to some kind of spirit of enquiry. Why, then? Because whoever was absent hadn't witnessed all of my failures as a transfer student today.

Flubbing my self-introduction, and being continuously ignored by Amiko Yurugase, wouldn't directly contribute to a bad first impression of me–so, thinking I could take advantage of their ignorance and become friends, it almost seemed like I was planning a con.

I'm still utterly sick and tired of trying to put on airs about my own superficiality up to now, but anyway, I identified the name of the absentee.

Indeed, even further than narrowing it down, I was able to identify the very person.

Combining my memories with the information from Amiko Yurugase, and eliminating names on the seating chart I could match to faces, only one seat remained–the specific name I arrived at by that process of elimination was "Hatamoto".

But that surname was all I knew.

I didn't even know if they were a boy or a girl–why? Because Amiko Yurugase had not given me a single bit of information about a student called "Hatamoto".

…Far from having suddenly resolved the affair, contrarily, I had absolutely no idea what was going on, and I started getting nervous that these assorted mysteries had started linking up and multiplying.

It felt like I'd gone astray in an unfamiliar maze. Going about this casually, I certainly hadn't found the solution to this riddle.

Of course, it wasn't like Amiko Yurugase's information was uniformly distributed among all the students–there were people she knew a lot about, and there people she didn't. For instance, as a girl, it was natural that Amiko Yurugase tended to have denser information about girls than boys, and as you might expect, she'd have more anecdotes involving flamboyant students and students who stood out. But at the time, I was agitated too, and while that doesn't really count, comparing the number of seats with the list of names, it became clear.

There was only one student whom Amiko Yurugase didn't touch upon at all–the student named "Hatamoto".

What did that mean?

That is, it probably didn't mean anything.

Or rather, it probably was inconsequential–after talking about so many people, I could understand that there might be a student about whom she lacked information.

But if it's only one person, just one single person, I can't help but say it's a little curious why she made absolutely no reference to them–it seemed to be on purpose, rather than a mistake.

Had Amiko Yurugase intentionally hidden the information on "Hatamoto" from me? Because she didn't want to tell me? Why? She didn't want to introduce "Hatamoto" to a troublesome person like me? But, well, if that was the case, surely there were other classmates she wouldn't want to introduce to me…

…I had an unpleasant premonition.

Or rather, I had an unpleasant feeling.

I had been scheming to make the absentee my next target because they wouldn't know about all of my massive failures today, but bearing in mind that I had no information about the absentee beyond their name, it felt like it would be better to withdraw now in order to avoid getting stuck even further into the maze.

Having a bad idea is worse than having no idea.

It would only lead to more failure.

If this was like always, I'd ignore the premonition, steel myself and dash off, but I could acutely feel a dangerous sign that this seating chart will make me stumble forward when I ought to stop. Breaking into a run, as if I was trying to escape from that premonition, I left the classroom–but it was already far too late.

Chasing and chasing and chasing, unable to catch up; escaping and escaping and escaping, unable to get away–that's me, the human called Sodachi Oikura.

010

Despite leaving school bearing a mysterious sense of defeat, I might have gotten through the rest of the day just by being depressed in my room at the Hakobe house; however, even returning home without accident was not within my capabilities.

You can't even get yourself home from school? If that's the case I'd want to congratulate myself on just getting this far–however, it's my assertion that I am not the only one responsible for that misfortune. I do have something of a masochistic tendency, but my tendency to mercilessly blame others whenever I can is at least as strong. I'm garbage, after all.

While I was talking with Amiko Yurugase on the roof and wasting time alone in the classroom, it had gotten very dark out; but when I tried to leave through the school gate, I had an unexpected encounter.

It was a group of three girls.

According to the information from Amiko Yurugase, it was our leader-like classmate So-and-so Suzubayashi, and two others–the two others seemed to be her kouhai in a club. I didn't know which club it was, but since they were wearing jerseys, it had to be a sports club. They seemed to be returning from club activities–no matter what kind of club it was, since she was a third year, she should have retired a long time ago, but even after retiring those OBs frequently make appearances.

It looked like they were about to go home together, but So-and-so Suzubayashi's kouhai seemed to be bothering her–no, no, surely they were idolizing her, in a state of mutual happiness.

I wonder what it feels like to be idolized by your kouhai… Suzubayashi… Ah, right, her full name was Lily Suzubayashi.

If I'd encountered her in the classroom just now, I might have mustered my courage and tried to start talking to her, but now the timing was completely off.

I could even say it was bad timing.

On account of my bad feelings about that seating chart, I was completely exhausted, and in this dejected state I didn't think I wanted to talk with anyone–if I could, I'd have wanted to pretend not to have noticed them and pass by.

Fortunately, since she appeared to be happily chatting away with her kouhai, tact would dictate that I shouldn't butt in; that'll work as an excuse–or at least, it should. But, just before she passed beneath the school gate, Lily Suzubayashi and her two kouhai stopped and turned toward me. Like they were blocking my way forward–even trapping me in. Ugh.

Looking at her expression, she seemed proud, somehow–ah, I see, she's going to give me a hard time.

Because I'm quarrelsome, or I should say, because there was a time when I'd snap aggressively at anyone and everyone (and I'd

find it hard to say I've completely recovered), I somehow understood.

Giving me a hard time–I suppose that means today's final event is going to be this unexpected interaction with a classmate.

Interaction I didn't wish for, that there was no reason for me to want.

No, well, this was just a coincidence, even to Lily Suzubayashi, and she's just capitalizing on this coincidence–actually, it's just bad timing.

Gah, such a pain… I felt like I could understand how much of a bother I was being to Amiko Yurugase by following her around.

With a feeling of futility, I pretended to have forgotten something, and tried to turn back to the school building, but I was called out to with a, 'Wait, transfah,' and there was no escape to be had.

'Goin home late, en't ya. I wanna talk to ya about somethin.'

I wanted to say, 'I don't have anything to talk about,' and leave, but her two kouhai were blocking the way–it was a splendid combination, as if they had planned it in advance.

Even if I tried to force my way through, there's no way I could prevail against three opponents–to say nothing of the fact that these jersey-wearing girls seemed like they played sports.

I've made up my mind.

From now on, if I have any painful experiences, no matter how small, I'll head

toward Naoetsu High School right away and punch Araragi. I'll let my anger out on him.

Just from imagining that, I calmed down a little–I even put on a thin smile.

That seemed to look creepy to the two kouhai (well, it was), and they appeared to falter in the face of my mysterious impropriety; but as expected of the leader-like Lily Suzubayashi, she could hardly be bothered to raise an eyebrow.

Leader, hm… Come to think of it, there was a time when I thought of myself that way… though that was a long, long time ago.

Perhaps I couldn't achieve peace of mind when socializing if I didn't consider myself in such a position–I wasn't able to associate with people on equal terms.

I knew that from the start, but I couldn't face it–following that line of thought, Lily Suzubayashi was quite unabashedly like a leader.

I didn't think that because of our current face-off, but rather because I felt a peculiar aura about her when I introduced myself that morning–even if I hadn't been lectured by Amiko Yurugase, I'd have realized that Lily Suzubayashi was a student in a good position in the class.

And because of that, it seemed hard to make friends with her… But if this is how we're getting involved, I couldn't help feeling regretful that I hadn't approached her in class today.

Well, fine. That's over and done.

Say something mean to me instead, please. Make this a bad experience, please. If you do, I can go punch Araragi. Come on, give me a pretext. Give me as much of a hard time as you want–if you like, I'll give you an excuse.

So, thinking like that, I asked, 'What business might you have with me, Suzubayashi-chan?' with an excessive affect–the two kouhai giggled at my amusingly foreign manner of speaking. Or were they giggling because they'd already been chatting about the transfer student's day of failures during club activities (something like, 'So she was able to talk without stuttering this time')?

Although, Lily Suzubayashi herself didn't seem to like that provocative '-chan'; she didn't so much as smile. Was she trying to get me to slip up by not responding?

To conform with their senpai, the two kouhai stopped their flustered laughter–ordering the scene into an awkward silence.

Well, setting aside the question of whether she was somehow commanding the two kouhai, Lily Suzubayashi knew about how badly I'd done as a transfer student, so even if I put on airs now and try to sound good, that shouldn't matter.

She'd already evaluated me.

But if that's the case, then it's puzzling why she's going out of her way to give me a hard time now–was she trying to show off in front of her kouhai?

Getting involved by attacking garbage like me, I'd think her popularity would only go

down… If she wanted to be respected, wouldn't it be better to show off in front of her kouhai by treating the failure of a transfer student nicely instead?

As usual, I was thinking selfishly; but as if she had understood me without being told, Lily Suzubayashi said something to the effect of, 'This is for your own sake, you know.'

I wasn't certain due to the mixed dialects, but I think she probably said something like that–I know I'm not experienced with it, but I think it's better to not be overly high-spirited, because after all, that's not the kind of class we're in.

High-spirited? Sodachi Oikura hasn't been high-spirited in at least two full years… or at least that's what it might look like.

Unexpectedly, I don't really know what my muddled self looks like from the outside… To my classmates, even my failures might have only been seen as playing the fool… That in itself is still humiliating.

For me, every single second seems like a life-or-death situation, but it would be very upsetting if people just thought of it as joking around.

But, as much as I insist upon that now, there haven't been any adverse effects–on the contrary, if Lily Suzubayashi is going to teach me how to be well-mannered in our class, it would be prudent to put on a more appropriate expression, or rather, put on a despondent expression, stay quiet and listen closely.

But then again, I am the epitome of feeble-mindedness, so I don't know how long my self-control will last, let alone any notion of prudence… I want to finish this talk soon.

Let me go home.

But, contrary to my wish, proudly and fluently, kindly and in detail, Lily Suzubayashi started describing all sorts of things to me; how she didn't want there to be trouble with me, how it's alright if I stand out badly, and how people would quickly become friends with me if I just acted normally, since it was originally a good-natured class.

In a different place at a different time, I'd feel nothing but grateful for this advice, but all I want right now is to go home.

I'm just getting more and more confused… I've had Amiko Yurugase give me profiles of each of our classmates, and I've had Lily Suzubayashi teach me about how to survive in the class, but I feel like I can't simply be happy about either.

I don't really think I can put all of that information into practical use.

I can't help but think that.

It's the fault of my bad personality; if people are kind to me, I end up trying to read into their ulterior motives–my distrust of people even extends to my new legal guardians, the Hakobe couple; I can't quite throw away any doubts that they could be plotting something… So there's no way I could readily trust Amiko Yurugase and Lily Suzubayashi, whom I'd just met today.

Well, setting aside Amiko Yurugase, with Lily Suzubayashi it was harder to understand her plan, or rather to read between the lines– it didn't seem as though she was just trying to treat the transfer student nicely to look good in front of her kouhai.

She didn't like her.

It's not that she didn't like me, or my behavior–no, well, she probably didn't like me anyway–but somehow, the person she seemed to consider an enemy was Amiko Yurugase.

To put it simply, she seemed displeased that I was so fixated with Amiko Yurugase–I felt that in the nuance of her words.

'Rather than buttering up that kind of girl, it'd be more advantageous to go with us.' That's not exactly what she said, but it's the meaning I gathered.

If that's the case, then this isn't advice, it's a warning.

Somehow, it appeared as though Amiko Yurugase's isolation was more than just a product of my imagination–or was it that Lily Suzubayashi herself had taken the initiative to push her out?

I hadn't heard anything like that from Amiko Yurugase, but…, well, you generally wouldn't want to discuss the details of your own ostracism in your first meeting with a transfer student.

In any event, this class's faction rivalries and power struggles were quite beyond my control…, even if Amiko Yurugase and Lily Suzubayashi were enemies, even if they were

opposing sides, that kind of territorial battle has nothing to do with me.

Or to say it more clearly, I didn't want to get involved.

I fancy myself a disinterested bystander–so what I ought to do here was take Lily Suzubayashi's advice with an 'uh-huh' and pretend from the bottom of my heart that I understood it.

I ought to pretend I was reflecting on my thoughtlessness, enough so that she could harbor no doubts–but you could say that this reaction was the same as the one I'd attempted (attempted, and failed) with Amiko Yurugase.

Thinking back on how I've behaved, I've been quite the opportunist; a fairweather friend, you might say, an underling with a horribly gray morality.

Really, I'm beyond help.

I want to express my heartfelt sympathies to everyone here for ending up in the same class as a hopeless person like me–so, finally, Lily Suzubayashi, from whom I'd never have thought to receive such compassion, said, "Is that alright?" Well, that was just my own high-handed interpretation of her dialect; what Lily Suzubayashi had actually said wasn't "Is that alright?"

It was actually, "Ya gaht it?"

'I gaht it,' I replied.

It was just that I'd inadvertently let the dialect infect me, but Lily Suzubayashi seemed to take it as me screwing around with her, and glared at me.

Being glared at, I reflexively ended up glaring back–that's weird, by all accounts I should want to get along with everyone, but how did this end up happening? I suppose it's because I don't really want to get along.

However, while you could say it was because she was in front of her kouhai, Lily Suzubayashi seemed to regard this as the right time to end the conversation. Prompting the two behind her with words to the effect of, 'Sorry to have kept you waiting, now, let's go, shall we?', she didn't say so much as a 'goodbye' to me.

It was what's called 'not giving a damn'.

She'd hurt me with that meaningless action. To think that someone could be hurt like this from such a nonchalant movement… One of these days, I'd like to behave like that in front of Araragi.

I'll use this as a reference, or as something to learn from…, at least it's much better as a study material than something enumerated in a manual.

Was that the attitude of a class leader?–It doesn't seem like I could imitate it, and if I tried to, I'd probably end up not knowing why I tried to do something like that in the first place.

But if I let that go, what remains is something I was grateful for–the selfless advice I received from her. Somehow, despite the fact I couldn't do anything on my agenda, I'd procured all I could shrewdly procure from Amiko Yurugase and Lily Suzubayashi… Speaking in terms of loss and gain, of course

it was a gain, but the fact of the matter was that none of it was due to my own hard work and effort, so I couldn't help feeling gloomy inside.

Even if you work with all your might, you can't affect anything in your life, I thought, as if fate itself was giving me a kind, gentle warning. Like, *look like you're in a good mood and run along the rails that have been set out for you*–if I were asked whether there was something bad about that, I'd have no answer I could give.

It turned out all right.

That had nothing to do with me failing or getting off the right track–all's well that ends well.

Well, there was just one thing left that I had to do.

Tomorrow, I had to pick sides between the apparently hostile Amiko Yurugase and Lily Suzubayashi.

Or was my decision already settled?

If it's between the girl generally accepted as isolated and the girl generally accepted as leader-like, then I wouldn't even need to compare and contrast–naturally, I ought to join up with the latter.

Even keeping in mind that because I ended up offending her at the last minute, she certainly didn't think I was very likable, since she had tried to win even me over to her side in order to preserve Amiko Yurugase's isolation, I couldn't very well show disapproval–if she's a leader, she would be able to make that level of political decision.

But let alone a political decision, I'd find any judgment of right and wrong suspicious–even if the right path is clear, for some reason I'm not able to choose it, even if it's a path I can tell intuitively is wrong, for some reason I can't help but choose it.

I don't like to do as people tell me, so I end up in meaningless defiance; I resist doing the profitable thing just because it's "profitable"–I don't want to be thought of as someone easy to read, who just moves according to loss and gain and advantages and disadvantages.

I don't want to be made fun of as someone who's easy to read.

It's true that it's the temperament of a childish contrarian, but for me, who's continually visited by misfortune, it's what little self-defense policy I have.

If my actions could be predicted, it would prove lethal–well, but, if I try to become hard to read, I would just end up as a girl who's hard to get along with, and I wouldn't be able to protect myself.

Besides, if I unexpectedly tried to side with Amiko Yurugase, I might be even more likely to be rejected by her than by Lily Suzubayashi.

And at the end of it all, I'd be isolated.

It wouldn't become some kind of three-way standoff–at worst, there's even the possibility that Amiko Yurugase and Lily Suzubayashi would think, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend," and, both considering me a hostile adversary, would collude against me.

That's no joke.

I don't know why those two are hostile with each other, but I certainly don't know of any way to get them to reconcile–so after all, the conclusion is clear.

However, in my lifestyle, driving myself into dilemmas is almost like a pastime, so I don't think I'll know which choice I'll actually make until tomorrow.

Aah, I'm sick of this already.

I don't care whether tomorrow comes or not.

But since today has been considerably unpleasant, it'd just be the same–well then, it's fine if tomorrow comes, though I won't be able to give it a warm reception.

011

My second day as a transfer student.

I'd been groaning and thinking all night, and I'd even driven myself to the verge of feigning illness to try to stay home, but in the end there was no way I could play hooky in front of the virtuous Hakobe couple.

I'd somehow managed to lie to them that, 'School was fun; I think I'll be able to do well at that school,' but in the end I lost my nerve.

It might be that the virtuous Hakobe couple had pretended to be tricked by that transparent, childish lie, but even if that's true, to shut myself away on my second day as a transfer student, wouldn't that mean that I haven't grown at all from when I was enrolled in Naoetsu High School?

It's too late to try to change what anyone thinks of me, but I couldn't even endure imagining Araragi thinking, "She never changes, does she."

So, getting stubborn, I changed into my uniform and headed toward Shishikurasaki High School–maybe, when I arrive in the classroom, there's even a possibility that yesterday was all a dream (as if!).

Leaving matters to random chance.

My mental image of him notwithstanding, that seems like something the real Koyomi Araragi would do–I wonder how nice would it be to be able to act without thinking the way he does.

And being able to act even if I did think.

If that man weren't Koyomi Araragi, I'd want to learn from his example about how to live–at least for this one morning, I'll try to be that kind of person.

But even if I ought to be happy about this, or if I ought to be happy in the midst of misfortune, when I finally reached the classroom, I was still stuck in the dilemma between Amiko Yurugase and Lily Suzubayashi.

Come on, choose one of them! But, although I was pressed for an answer, I managed to get by without picking between those two wonderful alternatives–speaking of which, I'm grateful that someone like me somehow seems popular, but the reason a hateful person like me got by without being compelled to make that harsh choice was not that I'd managed to come up with a good idea in time. Whatever I try to do, whatever failures I try to make, none of it has any effect on my life–if I say so myself, it seems like my life is just someone else's problem.

In other words, it was because the circumstances changed.

I hadn't changed, the circumstances changed.

The circumstances, or rather I should say, the conditions of the dilemma–despite that, not knowing when to give up, I was pretending to take a tour around the interior of the school; but when I entered the classroom at the last minute before the bell, Lily Suzubayashi was there as expected, but Amiko Yurugase was not.

She was absent.

…Absent?

No no no no, must be a joke.

Didn't she seem so lively yesterday when I was trying to talk to her?

Pretending to be sick? Doing what I didn't do?

But why would Amiko Yurugase pretend to be sick?

Wouldn't it be better for me to stay home, after being pressed to make a choice between two quarrelsome classmates on my second day as a transfer student, than for Amiko Yurugase? Is she trying to escape from me, the obstinate student who kept approaching her?

I'd be shocked if that were true; though I wouldn't go so far as to say that we had settled our dispute on the roof after school yesterday, we should have reached a tentative agreement.

I can say this with certainty, but I hardly think Amiko Yurugase thinks I'm that much of a threat. Rather than not coming to class herself, I'm sure she'd have chosen a plan to drive me out of the class instead–but, well, even that hypothesis might be the result of my unpolished, unrefined mental image of her.

Whatever the case may be, one of the parties presented to me as an option had withdrawn before the time to make the choice had come–however much I can make a mess of things just by myself, however much

I'm a girl with that kind of temperament, I won't choose nothing. I can't choose nothing.

I've had the ladder pulled out from under me one way or another many times, and many times I've kicked the ladder away myself, but even I can't climb a ladder that's been knocked down from the start–so now that it's come to this, I suppose I have no choice but to be affiliated with the Lily Suzubayashi faction. Or rather, strictly speaking, it's the faction of everyone except Amiko Yurugase.

While I was busy being bewildered by this unforeseen development, I took my seat, and, 'Mohnin, transfah. Quiet today, en't ya.' The voice was filled with sarcasm, but I could detect no hostility; as I thought, it belonged to Lily Suzubayashi.

Not knowing what to say, I returned her greeting with an ugly, forced smile that I came up with on the spot–and that's how my second day as the new me began.

012

After that, my second day turned out to be quite different in every way to my first day–to put it in simple terms, all of my classmates began "making a fuss" over the transfer student. That is, me.

At any rate, I could hardly believe it was happening, so I can't help but describe with double quotation marks, but they were evidently "making a fuss", like they were all trying to entertain me.

Everyone took turns coming over to my seat and asking about my previous school–since I'd rather die than talk about that, I used whatever lies came to mind at the time (they didn't make any sense whatsoever); but anyway, everybody was immensely curious about me.

All of them wanted to know more about Sodachi Oikura.

Because I feel an instinctive sense of denial when talking about myself, I felt quite uncomfortable, and I had to suppress the urge to run away with all my might; however, ordinarily, it would be one of the best developments a transfer student could conceivably hope for.

Both boys and girls argued over who would eat lunch with me–even in a hallucination I couldn't have imagined the scene that unfolded before me.

If I reported this experience to Araragi, far from believing me, he might even take me to get medically examined–though if I say so

myself, I'm not entirely sure why it's started to seem like I have a duty to report the details of my new life to that man. Anyway, trying to swallow that thought, I almost felt like I had heartburn.

So, what is going on here?

Was all of my failure yesterday really a dream after all? No, the cynical tone of Lily Suzubayashi's greeting this morning could only indicate that what happened yesterday was cold, hard fact.

Though, after that, Lily Suzubayashi had treated me exceedingly kindly–she taught me about the peculiarities of our homeroom teacher and the teachers in charge of each subject, and ultimately, I ended up eating lunch today with her group.

It really did feel like the top group in the class hierarchy, and I felt more uncomfortable than usual, but to say that I didn't enjoy it would be today's biggest lie.

It's true that I'm prone to carelessness and isolation, and shut myself away, unable to cope with communal life, but I'm definitely not a girl who likes being alone.

Being alone is easier for me, but I don't like it.

I want to make friends, I want to be friends with everyone, but I just can't do it–so, not knowing the correct way to behave in this situation, it was difficult to stop grinning like an idiot. It was like I was being surrounded by paparazzi.

I wanted someone to kick me from behind and ask, *You're bad at forcing a smile, so what*

are you grinning about? My old self at Naoetsu High School would have gone mad with jealousy if she'd witnessed this new Sodachi Oikura.

Of course, even though I couldn't have imagined this upheaval, my powers of suspicion trump my powers of imagination, and I couldn't erase all of my doubts. Like, aren't they just playing with the newcomer by excessively fussing over me, bewildering me and laughing at my confusion behind my back… It was impossible for me not to bear those kinds of misgivings.

But by the end of school, I had no choice but to recognize how improbable it was for most of those doubts to hold any truth.

It might be more appropriate to think that malice could be involved if there were only one or two groups doing it, but's a bit hard to make the case that every single person had ill intentions–I thought that Lily Suzubayashi would try to win me over to her side completely while Amiko Yurugase was absent, but if she had the leadership skills to mobilize the entire class like this (or should I call them instigation skills?), then it shouldn't be a very big problem whether I fell into her camp or not. She'd be able to force me to surrender right away, without having to go about it in this roundabout way–if she was that much of a "special person", that is.

But everyone here, including Lily Suzubayashi, is one of those "normal kids" I've yearned after–that kind of madness wouldn't appear here.

That kind of madness doesn't happen.

So just how can I resolve this precipitating and overflowing situation in a reasonable way? How can I logically interpret this development, which I can only describe as being lost in a parallel world?

In my head, I understood that I ought to enjoy this without worrying about trivial details, but if I could really do that then I'd have no troubles.

I'm on the verge of saying that everyone was compassionately treating my failures yesterday like they were nothing–like they were all colluding to not bring them up. While I was pretending to take a tour of the school this morning, they might have all held a class meeting to discuss "how to treat Sodachi Oikura".

Did someone propose that, *She seems so pitiful, so let's all act modest and make friends with her...*?

...I'd intended to give a preposterous example, but somehow even that seemed possible. "She seems so pitiful" certainly feels like it has a touch of reality to it.

Ah, right. My life and my way of thinking are both pitiful.

It wouldn't be strange for me to gather sympathy from my classmates–I can't hide my feelings of shame, but because of that I can still have a decent experience; there's some truth in that.

So, in order to minimize the time I spend putting these details in order, I'll interpret it like that. I ought to treat my failures

yesterday like nothing too, and from today onward, I'll redo my new life.

A new life befitting a transfer student.

Since I can't expect to get pampered like this forever, I have to change my way of thinking, to make use of this bonus time to the maximum.

This is an unexpected chance to reset things.

If I don't utilize this situation, I'll stay pitiful my whole life–to that end, I ought to use it to adapt to this new class.

Even if I'm wrong, I shouldn't reject my classmates' visits–so, there's no time to spare thinking about the absent Amiko Yurugase.

Let alone the other absentee, Ayakari Hatamoto, who wasn't in school today either.

013

I'd thought that the chance the gods granted me was just one day, but this treatment continued the next day and even the day after–if I don't maintain a steady mind, I fear I may end up under the delusion that I'm receiving this warm welcome because I seem like a cute and good-natured girl.

Don't be foolish. It's just because I'm cute. I have a bad personality, and there's no way I give off a good impression. I don't even have any confidence in whether or not I'm cute, really. I think I have an unpleasant look in my eyes.

If I don't keep abasing myself like that, I'll get into high spirits and commit another failure–even here, it's likely that I'll keep repeating the same failures that I've made over and over again.

Honestly speaking, even if it had continued for just one day, I'd be liable to become completely absorbed into this comfortable lifestyle, but in any event, the day after the day after the day after that, it was Saturday.

In other words, it was a day off from school.

Naoetsu High School was a rigorous private school, so there was a half-day of lessons on Saturdays, but the public Shishikurasaki High School had an ordinary two-day weekend.

Because I'd shut myself away for so long, I'd thought that a two-day weekend was too

much time off, but I suppose at least that much time is needed for an insecure girl like me to shake off my unsteady emotions and regain my composure.

I'd had a fleeting hope that maybe I'd still be popular among my classmates on the weekend, but nobody really invited me to do anything, and for a moment I wondered, "Why?"

Then I returned to my senses. My good-for-nothing senses.

Even if I hadn't, though, it would have been quite difficult to keep ignoring the fact that Amiko Yurugase had been absent for three days in a row, however much I tried to shake off those unsteady emotions.

It's true that I'd intended to completely reset myself, but to reset the existence of an individual person, to treat them as nothing, isn't that almost like a kind of witchcraft?

The fact that not a single person in the class would talk about Amiko Yurugase weighed on my mind–even if she's being isolated, isn't this taking it a bit too far?

I'd understand if she was ignored while she was here. I can't say I haven't experienced something similar myself.

However, she's still being ignored even when she isn't here… I think that's pretty different from simple discord, hostility, hatred and such.

Indeed… it's as if she's a taboo.

Like something you mustn't bring up.

I'd been treated like a tumor that way as well, and that's probably the closest thing to it–but it's still hard to say that's correct.

And besides, it seemed like the class felt no guilt about what they were doing–not everyone, but that's what I could take from the majority.

I had a bad habit of thoroughly examining peoples' faces, but even if I'd surmised that the class's behavior had been unified, I could say that their intentions did not altogether match up.

As a result of all the different motives at work, everyone had started treating me kindly–it appears that they hadn't held anything like the classroom assembly that I'd imagined. I finally managed to reach that conclusion at noon on Sunday.

No one thinks I'm particularly important. Just like always. It's not even that they were being considerate of how pitiful I am.

That's probably just an excuse I came up with.

They likely had various aims, but the biggest one was to treat me nicely as an act of atonement.

Not to give me this kind of hospitality in Amiko Yurugase's place. It's not that; they're treating me nicely to reduce their feelings of guilt for ignoring Amiko Yurugase–yes, that's the nuance.

That's more like it.

That aspect seemed to be different with Lily Suzubayashi, who was so clearly antagonized with Amiko Yurugase, but I don't

think there's any mistake that was the general feeling in the class. Though, regardless of conscious awareness, subconsciousness is a different question.

This isn't a suspicion of my particular type of lowlife; even allowing for some errors, it squarely hits the mark. I have unwavering confidence in that conclusion, like I've correctly proved a math problem.

…But if that's the case, then why should I care?

No matter what feelings those boys and girls are carrying in their hearts, as long as they're not being cruel and spiteful toward me, I ought to deem it acceptable.

If I don't want anyone to interfere with my own inner feelings, then I shouldn't be concerned with other peoples'–not to mention that I'll only be staying in this class for one short month.

At any rate, it's not like I have to find a lifetime friend with whom I can get along from among the members of this class–I'd be utterly satisfied if I can just pass the remaining days uneventfully. You could say my youth is overly gray, but well now, if it's me you're talking about that's just how it goes.

So I'll start the new week without puzzling over it any more than I have, without taking any action whatsoever–pfft, ha ha, of course I can't do that.

I'm Sodachi Oikura. The woman who can snap at anyone.

The pitiful girl who can't help but do something.

If what I attain isn't the result of my own actions, even if I'm blessed, I refuse it. There might really be some true good will and sympathy and kindness among the classmates making a fuss over me–but I don't care.

I'll throw down the gauntlet. I'll turn this upside down. I believe that it's fine to be pampered, to be treated affectionately, but I'll betray that belief, and rebel.

I'll defy destiny.

Because this is not the happiness I want.

014

Resetting target.

I need to get information out of someone.

It would appear that this difficult operation requires prudence; but, at the same time, it was easy to get started–because of the personal information that I'd received from Amiko Yurugase.

I'm sure Amiko Yurugase hadn't at all envisioned me using it for something like this, and probably didn't want me to either, but it was just the way of the world for scattered personal information to be abused in unforeseen ways.

I have two candidates.

The girl who'd been evaluated as nice, Norika Kyakufuji, and the boy who'd been endorsed as reliable, Yuuhei Hashimura.

As for the others, such as the very loose-tongued Eritari Kiriki, and the weak-natured Bouto Odorima, they had made it through the first round of nominations, but students with good evaluations, moreso than students with low evaluations, are a weak point for a crooked person like me.

I do think I'm the worst of them all, but I can't allow a single mistake from now on–if I don't impose on people's good will, I can't find a way forward.

I seem apologetic, but I have no excuses for it–I'd just been thinking that I'd exhausted all of the garbage inside of me, but no, no, not yet, inside I'm still sinking forever into a bottomless swamp.

Just how bad is my personality, if I seem most alive when I'm plotting some invariably unsuccessful, sinister scheme? There's really something wrong with me.

If this is what it feels to be alive, I'd rather be dead–but, in any event, I've opted for "evil" over "good".

So, who should I aim for, between Norika Kyakufuji and Yuuhei Hashimura? They do seem like similar people, so based on that I don't know which way I should fall, and after all, I'd consider going after a girl or a boy equally.

Thinking about it simply, it'd seem like I ought to pick Norika Kyakufuji, as we're both girls; however, thinking about how Amiko Yurugase, Lily Suzubayashi, and even Ayakari Hatamoto, all of my 'key persons' were girls, I had a feeling that it would be better to balance out the gender distribution.

Things like, since we're both girls it'd be easier to talk, or that we'd understand each other better, didn't really apply in my case–fundamentally, I'm the type of girl that other girls tend to dislike.

I'm aware of that.

But even if I say that, I'm definitely not the type of girl that boys tend to like; however, now, if that jumbled up, bizarre atmosphere in the classroom was concentrated on the girls' side, what I really wanted was to hear a boy's opinion on it.

Of course, it's not like the boys have nothing to do with it, and I'm not in search of some kind of objective opinion, but since I'm

that kind of narrow-minded person, I wanted to acquire knowledge about this problem from a position far removed from its focus.

I'd thought it could be better to try to get information from both Norika Kyakufuji and Yuuhei Hashimura, but I rejected that decent, idealistic idea right away.

However good of an idea it was, if I can't execute it, I can only reject it–with my mentality, I'm at my limit just dealing with a single person.

Collect all the information I could from the all of the persons involved, lay out the mass of evidence and make a comprehensive decision–if I could act that shrewdly, so un-Oikura-like, then I certainly should forget everything from Naoetsu High School.

Unaided and alone, using the minimum amount of movement to spy behind the scenes, and on top of that, doing it speedily–in less than a day if possible–if I can't draw up the resolve, I'll probably lose my motivation.

Therefore, I'll narrow my target down to one person.

It's fine if there's just one victim.

I certainly won't solicit help from someone. It'd be decidedly better to have someone to help me in this situation, but even the thought of trying to get along with a helpful person made me shiver in apprehension.

Since it seems as though I'll regret either choice regardless, I'd even be fine with a coin flip deciding for me, rather than worrying

and complaining this much; but it was never my intention to rely on luck here (look, I'm a real pain).

So, stubbornly thinking about it by myself, I stubbornly produced an answer by myself– at the end of my indecision, I determined Norika Kyakufuji as my target.

I chose the girl over the boy.

I know, reason dictates I ought to choose a boy here–I know, that would have helped me a lot in the future, and that if I approach Norika Kyakufuji, in the worst case I fear I might make enemies of all the girls in the class.

Why can't I make the right choice, even in the simple details of the groundwork part of the plan? That left me utterly in despair, but on the other hand, it's a hard fact that actually making the decision made me feel good.

I'd feel shy talking with a boy… and that's not me trying to feign naivety. I've accumulated quite a personal history of intensely snapping at boys at the drop of a hat–and against my better judgment, there have even been times when, to the best of my ability, I've acted cute and appealed with femininity.

But essentially, I'm scared of boys. I don't really want to talk about it in detail, but what I'm afraid of is how large and how physically strong they can be.

In short, it's the same reason why I'm afraid of crowds.

I'm afraid of having violence wielded against me.

If I analyzed this seriously, I suppose it has something to do with my upbringing, but I wonder if girls generally have a similar kind of outlook on boys.

Ultimately, when negotiating with people who have the power to crush my opinion and attitude with violence, it's unavoidable that I get faint-hearted–or possibly, that I get excessively brash.

So if possible, I'd rather not face off one-on-one with a boy.

If I had to, in a situation beyond my control, I'd screw up my courage; however, since there was another choice available, by all means, I'll make that choice–I don't like getting hit.

The more I get hit, the more fed up with it I get.

Though, it's possible that I get hit anyway when trying to extract information from my classmates.

I say I won't use violence, but I'm quite a barbaric creature myself–even though I wouldn't call it peaceful, from here on I'm going to be disturbing a community that has attained a certain level of harmony.

Even if I were intending to make meringues, trying to impose on the kind-hearted Norika Kyakufuji's kind-heartedness–I'm sure that just from knowing the filth of a disgusting person like me, her virtuous future will be spoiled.

Whenever something bad happens, she'll remember me–I did have enough of a conscience to feel guilty about that, but it's too late for me to stop.

Early Monday morning, I lay in wait for Norika Kyakufuji near the entrance to the school building, and then I dragged her to the roof–"dragged" is a strong word, but actually, if the ruffian-like technique I used wasn't dragging, then I could only use words like "abduction" or "kidnapping" to describe it.

Good grief, I'll never be a champion of justice at this rate–I wonder how proper people would behave at a time like this. But then, the hard, undeniable truth of the matter was, by using this high-handed, wrong method, I'd succeeded in arranging a one-on-one with Norika Kyakufuji.

In her case, me jumping out at her in such a reckless fashion surely seemed like a completely unexpected turn of events–well, it was.

If I were to evaluate myself, I'm guilty of quite a lot, and not a single thing has gone well in my new life as a transfer student, but I haven't fallen into hysterics, and I haven't hurt anyone physically–as much as I've demonstrated how low of a person I am, I can even say I've just barely managed to avoid being called dangerous.

She may have thought I was rather slow after I stuttered through my self-introduction, but there's no doubt she didn't expect me to do something so sharp as forcefully summoning a classmate like this.

Now that it's come to this, it's almost as if I'm under the illusion that I passed the previous week with the most effective behavior to prepare for today, including the fact that Amiko Yurugase taught me that this roof was a deserted place–even so, from Norika Kyakufuji's perspective, it was probably just sheer misfortune.

Well, I at least want to learn from her, how she answered a summons from a disaster like me with grace, kindness, virtue, good character, and even a little charm; I want to make use of that in my life from now on–at the very least, I may act somewhat violent toward you, but I swear that I will not wield violence against you.

I swear it to Araragi.

If, for instance, I'm unable to obtain the result I desire, and I lay even a single finger on Norika Kyakufuji, I swear I will kiss Araragi on the cheek. To me, that's an even more humiliating vow than promising to kiss the ground. Just from swearing it I'm starting to feel sick–from Norika Kyakufuji's view, she'd probably just say, 'Who even is that?'

Well, while she was looking bewildered with an, 'I don't get it,' the story I got out of her was the best I could hope for.

Luckily, my sudden show of animalism–not like a panther or a clever beast, rather, a horse perhaps–had shown my true character–,Norika Kyakufuji was trembling with fear, just like a small animal, and there was no hint that she'd realized my bluff.

However, I didn't feel any sympathy for her cowering appearance, nor was I provoked to sadism, nor did I fly into a rage– but it was all I could do to keep my frustration from boiling over.

Ah, right. That's why.

If you're born into a good family, if you grow up eating well, this is how you turn out– I thought quietly. If you're treated kindly by your family and your friends, this is how you turn out.

Ah, unpleasant, isn't it.

After this, I suppose this girl won't furrow her brows again for her whole life–she won't raise her voice, grind her teeth, kick a wall.

Nice, that.

Since I'm fine by myself, I don't suppose that'll ever come to me, I guess.

If it's all I can do to just take care of myself, isn't is alright to be alone? No, no, each and every person goes through difficult times, but to the best they can, they endure and keep on living, I guess.

I suppose.

If I'm not the most wretched human there is, then surely I can't say that this world is a crueler place than hell, I guess.

Or, wasn't it?

Even my plan to make friends with this kind of peaceful girl, call each other by our first names, hang out together, study together… Right now, am I not trying to destroy it, to cover it all up in black?

If I am, that's fine. I'm only me, after all.

Norika Kyakufuji was unable to relax herself, and must be thinking, 'Why did this happen to me?' I got up close to her–just like Amiko Yurugase did to me on my first day as a transfer student.

Even though I say that, I think it must have had several times the impact as when Amiko Yurugase did it–the look in my eyes is extremely ugly. When I look in a mirror, it's bad enough to make me yell in astonishment.

Honestly, I was a little anxious about the possibility that she could start crying (if she cried here, I might become unable to endure anymore and fly off the handle); however, I suppose she knew it was obvious that crying would be of no help whatsoever in this situation, and further, Norika Kyakufuji didn't seem to be having that much of a hard time.

How should I put it… she was that kind of peaceful girl.

That did make me feel a bit relieved–but as I'd expected, she was different from the people at Naoetsu High School.

She was different from those "special people".

Rather than 'not having a hard time', she presented no resistance–it felt like I was pressing on hanging fabric.

I had no intention of laying a hand on her, but let alone crying, I'd thoroughly thought through the possibility that Norika Kyakufuji showed fierce reluctance to talk–however, piece by piece, even though it seemed hard to talk about, she began her story. It was far shorter than I could have expected.

As overbearing and coercive as I'd been, and as much as she didn't relax her pose while she was reluctantly speaking, there was a tinge of passion about Norika Kyakufuji's tone of voice, and her words even started to flow–I've already spent five days total in this foreign classroom, so it wasn't much trouble for me to understand the peculiar accent.

While that may be the case, even if this doesn't reduce the severity of my crime of calling her out here and cross-examining her so forcibly, the perspective of exceedingly peaceful Norika Kyakufuji was, that the state of the class recently was fairly stressful–therefore, on account of their guilty feelings, they were treating the transfer student overly kindly. It looked like my reading was right on.

You see that! It's just as I'd thought; there's just no way someone like me would receive that kind of welcome from an impartial crowd!

Though, this certainly isn't a triumphant occasion.

Even though I'd thought they were making me comfortable due to their guilty feelings, it's not even like I'd pressed Norika Kyakufuji for this testimony–in the contents of her story, there were points I'd anticipated, but also points that went above and beyond my expectations.

While I was listening, there were even parts of her story that I didn't want to hear about, and I quickly started to regret acting

like such an amateur detective like this; just like I always do.

Ah, really.

Why am I doing this?

Surely Norika Kyakufuji didn't know why this was happening to her, but I felt the same way–why is this happening to me?

015

After school, I went to meet Amiko Yurugase.

Honestly speaking, I'd thought this would be the biggest obstacle–Amiko Yurugase has been absent from school all this time, and sure enough, she didn't show up on Monday either; so just how can I arrange to meet her?

I truly could not think of any way to do it.

As a transfer student, I didn't know the area, and I didn't have any contacts here–there was no way for me to discover Amiko Yurugase's address.

Long ago, I might have been able to consult the class registry or an address book and figure it out quickly, but these days regulating personal information was a top security concern for any organization–especially if it involved children.

Of course, just like the information on Ayakari Hatamoto, there was nothing on Amiko Yurugase herself in the information she'd given me on our classmates–besides, while she'd told me in detail about our classmates, she didn't at all touch upon any location information like who lived where.

I dare say she wasn't hiding it out of concern–since she'd gone into such detail about even male-female relationships, hiding addresses should be rather meaningless–I think what this meant was that even Amiko Yurugase didn't really know where our classmates lived.

Well, nowadays, communication between fellow students was mostly done with cell phones, and it might be thought fashionable to not know exact addresses–at present, the most important address to know wasn't someone's home address, but rather their email address.

In short, since I don't have a cell phone, I can't do anything about this situation–if that's how it is, I should have taken advantage of the Hakobe couple's good will and had them buy me a cell phone.

Well, even if I had gotten them to buy me one, it's hard to believe that I could have acquired Amiko Yurugase's contact information from another classmate…

By the way, as expected of our information society, my summoning Norika Kyakufuji to the roof had spread throughout the class in the blink of an eye, and my period of popularity sadly met its demise. It's not that Norika Kyakufuji told anyone (rather, it was more like she had gallantly stood up for me–perhaps it was fear of revenge, but it seemed like her virtuousness had melted some of the evil within me. What should I do if I actually start liking her?), but it appeared that my coercive manner of dragging her had been witnessed by someone. Even though I'd more or less made sure I was out of public view…

A state of isolation, by myself.

I'm not going to show off and say something like, I'm not lonely, or, I'm not sad; however, being alone did allow me to calm down, and that was also one of my intentions.

Being alone and isolated, being insulted behind my back, I think that's more who I really am–mm, it does feel like I'm hitting my stride.

So, that problem is nothing to worry about.

After being dragged away from a position of popularity, I faced the pragmatic issue of how to endure being with my classmates from now on; but in the end, the issue of how to contact Amiko Yurugase was more important to me–though it was quite a hurdle itself.

But, I barely made it in time.

Before my wickedness became well-known in the class–in other words, before Norika Kyakufuji had been taken under the protection of her robust, strong friends, I successfully procured some unexpected information from her.

In the final stage of my rooftop interrogation, she'd told me that despite being absent from high school, Amiko Yurugase was going to cram school.

Somehow, it appeared that Amiko Yurugase and Norika Kyakufuji went to the same cram school, and the latter had noticed the former sitting in the self study room.

Really, huh.

Skipping school yet attending cram school was quite incoherent behavior–though that was just a value judgment from someone who doesn't really know about cram schools.

It might be obvious nowadays that it's more efficient to study at cram school than at

high school. Maybe it's not all that unusual for an exam student to be okay with staying home from school, but to consider staying home from cram school altogether unthinkable. Since we're third years, in this semester you could generally eyeball the number of days you were in attendence…, there was a persuasiveness in viewing Amiko Yurugase's continued absenses as a result of such a calculation; she wasn't a thoughtless person like me.

However, cram school, hm…

I didn't have the need, nor the money, to attend one, but…, now that I think about it, a place where all you have to do is study, where there was no need to communicate with nearby members of my generation, it's quite ideal for me, and really seems like a comfortable space.

Isn't that just the best?

For Norika Kyakufuji's part, surely she was completely ignorant of my intention to take action outside of school in this case, and had inadvertently revealed that information to me; however, for my part, it was priceless, precious information indeed.

Of course, no matter what, I had to start working to find out of the name of the cram school, but there was quite an exceptional difference between that and the work needed to find a home address–a cram school's location would be made available to the public as a matter of course.

If exam students enrolled at Shishikurasaki High School were attending

this cram school, I should be able to narrow it down considerably–now that it's come to this, now that the curtain's been lowered on the period of being "fussed over" by my classmates, I could interpret this new period more positively, as a period of freedom that I could use to determine the specific cram school I'm looking for.

Even though it's no longer possible for me to gather information from my classmates, I could still ask teachers about cram schools in the region–after school, I all but determined the cram school that Amiko Yurugase was paying tuition to attend.

I can lose myself over the details, and in some respects I must enjoy that unproductive work–in the future, I'd like to pursue a job where I dig holes and fill them back up, or something like that.

But in the end, whether it was just an empty theory as useless as swimming on tatami mats, I headed toward my destination after school–but what surprised me was the scale of the cram school.

"Yuuge!" I ended up crying out.

This isn't a high school?

I can't believe it. I thought it might be a backdrop painting, spitefully created to make a fool out of me as a hillbilly from the countryside, but this was the right address, and I could see the signboard.

At any rate, I couldn't understand it, but as a result of loitering around the area, I somehow realized that its enormity was due to the fact that it also served as the

administration building of the cram school's management organization; however, even so, it was still quite a large-scale cram school.

I give up. It's just… well, I made quite the miscalculation.

I'd thought that I could meet with Amiko Yurugase straight away if I'd visit the cram school, but I hadn't imagined the cram school was so large–of course, because it's so big, surely there's a proportionally large number of students here, isn't there a considerable degree of difficulty to finding just one single girl among them, who I'd only spoken to once, and, honestly speaking, I can't say I wholly remember her face?

She's probably in casual clothes, and she could have changed her hairstyle, so I can't use those terms to find her–and in the first place, I'm not 100% sure this was the cram school Amiko Yurugase was attending. Even if I refuse to give in, and the place I'd narrowed it down to was correct, there's no guarantee that she was present here today.

Thinking about that, just thinking about that, I felt a profound sense of futility, and I started to think I should just go home, but I barely managed to rouse myself–hey, it just depends on how you look at it, right?

Because there were so many people, it was easy to disappear into the crowd. If this were a more small-scale cram school, there'd be no helping the fact that an unknown high school girl would stand out–I thought, trying to enter the building, but as soon as I tried, the wind left my sails.

It felt like my feet were trapped.

At the entrance to the cram school, a hand baggage check was being performed–a metal detector gate had been installed, and to get inside, students were showing the contents of their bags and some kind of cram school identification to a security guard.

That's not all; they were placing cell phones and music players, manga, and even novels in transparent plastic bags and handing them over–there appeared to be a rule that anything unrelated to studying had to be deposited into lockers. It seemed they were only allowed to bring items like textbooks, reference books, notebooks, writing materials, dictionaries, and analogue watches–since there was a possibility that digital watches could be smart watches, they also seemed to have been banned.

Surely that was too strict.

At least, that's what I thought, as a hillbilly from the country–it took my breath away. Surely all they'd need is an x-ray body scanner, and this would just about be an airport.

Thinking that maybe there was a customs inspection further inside, I unconsciously stood on my toes trying to see–but if I behaved suspiciously like that, they might call security on me, so I quickly corrected my posture.

But I couldn't easily settle my feelings of astonishment.[22] It was quite a staggering feeling of coming into contact with a different culture–was there something in this building

that they need to set up this much security for? I could only think that Arsène Lupin had sent them advance notice, or something.

However, speaking of appropriate measures, this might in fact be appropriate…, even if there wasn't a treasure Lupin was aiming for inside, since parents worry themselves about their precious children studying here, it was extremely important for the administration to turn away suspicious persons like me at the door. Precisely because they weren't some unwise school institution, which might be liable to run into issues of civil liberties, they were able to install this kind of gate here.

How goddamn proper.

If that's proper, what, are you people my enemies?

As I was feeling fiercely angry at those exam students, beloved by society, and with good future prospects, I thought there must be a rear entrance somewhere, and tried to find a different way in–I'd already gotten sick of the building's size and tried to go home, but if I'm presented with a clear obstacle, I end up wanting to overcome it.

I'd be happy if I could make use of this challenger spirit in a different form in my life. This would really be useful out in the world–I thought, wandering around the circumference of the building, once again searching for the location of a something like a staff entrance or a service entrance for materials; however, in the end, there was no need for that kind of loitering.

It's not that there wasn't another entryway, but rather, there was nothing I could do about the fact that the other doors had been tightly locked automatically; when I'd exhausted all of the options, I returned to the front entrance, and, huh? I realized something.

Huh? Or rather, hey!

The scene spread out before me was just like airport security, but I realized that the hand baggage check was quite unserious, or intentionally negligent, both on the part of the checker and the people being checked, and it appeared that it was being performed rather complicitly.

The security guard was letting students inside the cram school with just a glance at the interior of their bags and their school identification–even the rules about prohibited items somehow seemed completely informal.

Because there was a metal detector, they couldn't help but hand over electronic devices like cell phones and game consoles, but they could bring as much manga and stuff like that as they wanted.

The management system was rotten.

Deeply so.

No, surely there was no way the security guard was taking money under the table from the students. The reality was likely that, doing the same thing every day, they'd decided, "Suspicious people don't come here anyway, and if people won't study, nothing we can say will make them"–in the first place,

it's likely the case that this exaggerated security was a way to appeal to the students' guardians, and the rules weren't actually applied very strictly.

It's a little… yeah, disappointing.

However thoroughly thought out a system might be, however well-constructed it might be, since you had to get people to execute it, there's no escaping human error–moreover, there's no escaping human carelessness.

Shirking off, and laziness.

Since my life so far has been crushed by those kinds of things, by not doing the right thing, I couldn't help but feel disappointed–but while it was regrettable, to me, this was an altogether pleasing conspiracy.

Such nice rot. It's like fermentation.

It seemed like you could get through that checkpoint-in-name-only even if you weren't a student at the cram school–even if you were a heinously suspicious person like me plotting to do something bad to a student like Amiko Yurugase–to me, who's managed to slip through so many safety nets, that metal detector gate looked almost like a welcome archway.

Ku ku ku.

Putting on a wretched smile befitting a piece of garbage, I stepped forward–now then, security guards, let's see you open those dull eyes suddenly just for me, and use both hands to stop me!

I passed through the gate full of tension, almost in desperation, but the three brawny male security guards performing the check

did not suddenly awaken their sense of professionalism, and I almost didn't even seem to enter their field of vision, let alone pull the wool over their eyes–they'd probably look the other way even if I had a cudgel inside my bag.

Since I didn't have a cram school ID, I showed a high school ID in its place (I'd thought using an ID from Shishikurasaki High School would be pushing it a little, so I used the Naoetsu High School ID that I happened to still have); whether it coincidentally resembled the cram school ID, or whether the checkpoint was as dead as I'd thought, the security guard let me pass with a jovial, 'Go ahead, do your best with your studies.'

I know I shouldn't say this to an elder, but I couldn't help but think, why don't you do your best, you just let a suspicious person through–but well, surprisingly, this might be how criminals are born, I suppose.

It's a rather audacious idea for a guilty party to have, but if someone had properly stopped me earlier in the process, I'd have gotten by without resorting to trespassing–as I was thinking about just how many delinquent characters had snuck into the cram school using the same method as me, I hurriedly walked forward into the school.

Even bearing in mind the fact that the inspection was like a sieve, since I hardly had any hand baggage, there was nothing for me to hand over, there was no need for me to approach the lockers–I'd successfully entered, but there were a lot of people, and I

had no clues about how to find Amiko Yurugase's location.

I guess I'll have do a thorough search all around this extensive facility that I'd misread as a school…

Doing this kind of search operation myself wasn't enough to make me lose heart, but I can't say I had any useful ideas. All I can do is continuously execute bad ideas.

At a time like this, if I were a "special person" like Tsubasa Hanekawa or Hitagi Senjougahara, of course I'd be able to overcome this situation by myself, but even if I weren't, I could insist on a worthless thought like, if I lose my way, surely a passerby will suddenly appear to guide me to my destination…

These boys and girls all had means to get along in the world, through relationships, chance encounters, friends with similar interests and such–as a regular person with a bad personality, I had none of that.

If, for instance, Norika Kyakufuji, who appeared to attend this cram school, had appeared, she wouldn't say, "Come here, quick!" and take my hand to guide me–such a touching development wouldn't happen. Even if I relied on things like personal connections, communities, or interpersonal relationships, it's of no help now.

At home, at school, and at an unknown cram school, I'm alone.

Fine. I'll show them the power of being alone.

I'll resolve myself once again.

Thus, while fantasizing about meeting Norika Kyakufuji, I recalled one piece of effective information–indeed, she'd certainly said that she'd noticed Amiko Yurugase in the self study room.

I surely can't obsess over one detail and lose sight of the greater situation, and if she said she was in the self study room at that time, that doesn't mean she's in the self study room at this time today–however, I could use this as a point of reference.

Thinking normally, I'd guess that she was in a classroom somewhere receiving a lesson from a cram school lecturer, but there's no way I could barge into a lesson if I retained my sanity…, for now, I'll pretend to be studying in the self study room and await an opportunity. It's not the very best way, but it doesn't seem like an altogether bad plan for me.

Simply put, I was curious about how it felt to study in a cram school, and I wanted to personally experience the atmosphere–so, confirming the location of the self study rooms using a guide map next to a stairway, I started moving.

Walking inside the building like this, the structure almost felt more like a vocational school than a cram school–since I'd thought about pursuing that course myself when I'd left Naoetsu High School, that's the impression I had.

The checkpoint at the entrance was easy to fool, but there was a different group of security guards working inside the building,

and I felt a little uneasy (I hadn't expected them to be working); and if it were obvious from the point of view of a cram school student that I was not only a stranger, but an intruder, I was seized upon by my negative imagination–but in the end, I wasn't detained by anyone, and I arrived at the self study room.

It felt a little like I was invisible.

I was avoiding being seen in order to do something bad, and now that I'm here, both my feelings of guilt and exaltation started to deflate with a hiss.

Rather, I started feeling like nobody had taken any notice of me. Like I was being ignored. It made me realize that it'd be the same thing whether I was here or not–I'd made my decision, I'd taken action, and I'd felt like I was on some kind of great adventure, but now I felt like I'd taken a cold shower. With water so cold I fear I might die from a heart attack.

Before, I'd selfishly thought that a place like this, where all you had to do was study, was where I belonged, but now that I've made my way here, it seemed boring–at this rate, even if I went on to college, there's no doubt I'd have to endure this same feeling.

I really do understand (I understand).

I'm too quick to give up on myself. I pretend to be brave, pure, and philosophical, to keep the damage I receive to a minimum–I recognize that it's because of that damage control method that my whole body is full of wounds and defects. I recognize that, but I

can't help but continue. I understand that my way of life is counterproductive, but it's just so easy.

I thought a second time that I might as well go home, but I was on the verge of getting myself under control–well, I'd intended to await an opportunity in this self study room, but if I open the door and don't find Amiko Yurugase inside, I'll return home right away. I'll make a magnificent U-turn, enough to gather the eyes of every one of the cram school students.

I was on the brink of trying to attract people's attention by behaving eccentrically, and I suppose I was nearing my limit on how much tension I could handle, but I didn't quite have the self-awareness to realize that–really, if I open the door to the self study room and Amiko Yurugase isn't there, I'll spin right around like I'm performing ballet.

I might really get security called on me if I did that… but there was no need for that kind of development.

In other words, she was there.

Amiko Yurugase was there.

And moreover, I could see her uniformed appearance sitting right next to the door–there was no way to avoid her wide-eyed stare as our eyes met, and both of us froze.

Somehow, there seems to be a trend of me starting to dislike and despise the very things I wish for, as soon as they come true–it's no wonder that no matter how long it's been, I can't cut off my connection with Araragi.

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‘Wow, what a coincidence, I’m also going to be attending this cram school from now on! I’m so happy to have met you here, Yurugase-san! I’ve been so worried about you, being absent all this time. But I’m really glad you seem well!’ I went on and on with that kind of exaggerated lie, but I got absolutely no response–Amiko Yurugase scowled at me like I was some kind of man-eating demon, and with a few words to the friends she seemed to be studying with, she walked over to me with long strides, grabbed me by the scruff of my neck, and dragged me out of the self study room.

Despite that, I tried to repeat my jumbled up, disgraceful explanation, but Amiko Yurugase did not lend me her ears even a little. Now that it’s come to this, my discontent with her not believing my lie passed beyond my guilt over telling a lie–but since it was quite possible that she’d drop me in a chokehold if I showed much resistance, I let myself get hauled out of the room just like that.

Just what is happening? It’s as if I’ve finally hit the spotlight, and I’ve gathered the stares of all the cram school students who hadn’t cared a bit about me so far–I pretended it was no big deal with a wave of my hand, but from an outsider’s perspective there was no doubt it could only seem rather painful.

In that rather silly manner, I was taken all the way outside the cram school–I’d thought

she would go back inside after throwing me out, but not so; it appeared that Amiko Yurugase intended to take me even further away.

I suppose this is how Norika Kyakufuji felt as I'd dragged her up to the roof with all my might–though, if that's so, no matter how I look at it, this retribution has come much too quickly. For this to happen on the very same day, Norika Kyakufuji must be overly beloved by the gods.

Where are we going? Maybe she's bringing me to a back alleyway or someplace like that, and she'll really put me through the fire this time… I hadn't anticipated such a development at all in the first place, due to my own damned carelessness; however, the place where Amiko Yurugase finally let go of me was inside a 24-hour-service fast food restaurant.

This certainly seemed like a place that high school students use to chat with each other, though I hadn't experienced that culture myself–while Amiko Yurugase ordered a drink at the counter, she sat me down, then sat next to me.

Next to each other at a table for four.

It somehow seemed like the seating arrangement of two very good friends, but this was just the second time I'd properly spoken to her, and besides, the atmosphere was unprecedentedly, terribly serious.

It felt like my territory had been bluntly violated, and this really didn't sit well in my stomach; or rather, even now, I still haven't

learned my lesson and simply can't forgive her–either one of those.

Well, someone she despised had suddenly visited her without an appointment, so it's unavoidable that she would get angry at my arrival–I hadn't managed to get my head around that kind of possibility; I'm a fool to the end.

However, if that's so, then what kind of reaction was I really expecting from her? I definitely can't say that I wasn't envisioning something malicious like, rendering her astonished by suddenly revealing myself.

I ought to call it outrageous good fortune if I'm able to get out of here without being hit, and of course, I don't have any guarantees that I won't get hit in the future. Even if she pours her drink all over my brand-new uniform, I'll resolve myself to the commendable feat of not raising a single complaint.

I'm certainly not the kind of person who'd earnestly feel remorse for it, but on the other hand, I honestly felt happy and relieved that I'd found Amiko Yurugase in the self study room, earnestly studying together with friends.

What, she isn't alone after all, is she.

They must be friends she made at cram school, or maybe friends from middle school attending different high schools–isolated in our class, she had been absent several days in a row, and while it was unusually easy for me to sympathize with her reasoning for not being absent at cram school because it was a

place where you didn't have to build interpersonal relationships and all you had to do was study, somehow, it appeared as though things would not be resolved quite so simply.

Well, is there just no such thing as a place where you don't need interpersonal relationships?

Looked like she was having fun studying… With Amiko Yurugase laughing like that, and me willfully empathizing, it's unbearably embarrassing, unbearably unbearable, I want to just disappear from the face of the earth.

Amiko Yurugase might be furious with me right now, but I was gradually starting to overflow with a similar level of anger–I'd willfully convinced myself to do this, acted of my own accord, and now I'm willfully getting angry. My goodness, I really am unmanageable.

Whether those emotions of mine shone through without me saying anything (or rather, had I once again accidentally run my mouth?), ultimately, Amiko Yurugase posed the reasonable question, 'What the hell is up with you?' That overbearing tone was somewhat calmer than when she'd drawn close to me on the roof; how to put it, it was like she was utterly perplexed by me, a bizarre person who was able to see through to her hidden circumstances.

Well, I knew that I was just a good-for-nothing girl with a bad personality, but looking at it from Amiko Yurugase's perspective, as a transfer student who keeps

taking unexpected courses of action, not knowing much about my true nature, I might look somewhat mysterious.

Shrouded in mystery, or rather, ominous and creepy; if I appeared to be a “special person” on the level that people shouldn’t get involved with me, I would hardly be able to hold back my laughter, and I don’t think I’m happy at that misunderstanding, but… it was hard to deny that my sequence of actions on this occasion was deviating a little from my usual territory, and that’s what I’m worried about.

Even for Amiko Yurugase’s part, since this was only her second time speaking with me, even if she felt I was mysterious, even if she felt I was exotic, she might have been lost on how to approach me–if she’d made a mistake in dealing with me here, she didn’t know how an unknown transfer student who seemed to have come from a different culture would behave in the future, but that was no reason for her manner of speaking to grow timid.

Faced with a visit from me without any prior notice, it didn’t seem like she would run out of displeasure and indignation; however, the next thing that came out of Amiko Yurugase’s mouth was, 'What aya doin,’ and then, 'Didn’t I tell ya how to do well in class, hm?’ That line almost made me think she was trying to look out for me.

However, even if it appeared like she was worried about me, I once again felt like her ulterior motive was to push a troublesome classmate onto someone else in our class–

setting aside those kinds of suspicions, to purely and simply answer her question, she did tell me how to do well… but honestly speaking, if I can find the words for it, she did tell me how to do well, but today, it had all come to nothing by my own doing.

Since we wouldn't settle things if I'd kept silent about it indefinitely, I softly relayed that fact to her. Then, I brazenly told her, 'After doing that, I visited the cram school because I was worried about you, being absent from school.'

It wasn't a lie, but it certainly was hypocrisy.

Amiko Yurugase made a conspicuously unpleasant face at my shamelessness, but, forthrightly stated right next to each other, it looked like my explanation of the situation had connected inside her head–in other words, it appeared as though somehow, she was surmising that her advice had "come to nothing" as a result of me being "worried" about her.

She might be clever; it seemed that she possessed a much sharper sensitivity than the mental image suggested by the disorder of her tone and attitude.

Just as I guessed, there's an impression of the "class circumstances" I'd already heard from Norika Kyakufuji–anyway, Amiko Yurugase made a sour face, like she'd swallowed a bug.

She might be thinking that she wouldn't forgive me abusing the personal information she'd offered–since I feared I was being

pressed for an apology, to dodge that issue, I rattled on about my own position. I'll stutter a little, I'll be at a loss for words, but I resolved to face her down.

I no longer care what anyone thinks about me–at any rate, I'm the absolute worst, so however I'm misunderstood, that false image must be preferable to the real thing.

But even though I don't know when to give up, at least at the beginning, I decided to start the conversation sweetly.

Hmm, so.

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Amiko Yurugase was originally the most powerful member of our class–speaking of which, that's a bit of a faulty expression, with a considerably bad connotation as well–I do hate using strong words, but anyway, that's the anachronism Norika Kyakufuji used to describe this prolongued absentee here.

The most powerful.

It's certainly a fitting expression if that's how you interpret leadership, and if she was in that position, the vague feelings of doubt I'd had about how detailed her knowledge about our classmates' personal information and everyone's personalities was would disappear.

However, there was another student in our class who could be called leader-like (Amiko Yurugase herself had used that expression)–Lily Suzubayashi.

Even before I'd interrogated Norika Kyakufuji, that was something I'd intuitively felt: Amiko Yurugase and Lily Suzubayashi were in a state of antagonism.

Two leaders in the class?

That doesn't seem like it would go well, and it definitely seems like a trigger for trouble; however, according to Norika Kyakufuji, since the two of them were different types of people, their antagonism didn't appear to have created much unrest–well, I shouldn't talk about things based just on my impression, but Amiko Yurugase certainly didn't feel like a "leader" to me.

In the good sense, she seemed to have a big-sisterly disposition, and in the bad sense, she seemed crude.

Even if you have a certain influence due to popularity, that doesn't mean you're in a position to lead people–she's the type who would think that kind of practical work is just a "bother"… Lily Suzubayashi is the opposite, the type who enjoys looking after people. Even if she's retired, even if she's an OB, she'd still show up to her club activities; that could just be one way in which Lily Suzubayashi was a helpful-minded person.

If that's the case, then the distribution of roles would fit accurately; however, that structure certainly had its flaws… especially looking at it from Lily Suzubayashi's point of view, Amiko Yurugase had shrewdly obtained popularity despite acting however she wanted, and it probably seemed like an unfair situation–if I have to say it, I was more like Lily Suzubayashi, and I could well understand the jealousy an overly serious person feels for a completely free-acting person.

It could only seem like she was taking all of the good parts for herself–it's not entirely that simple, but if someone like Norika Kyakufuji used the expression "most powerful" for her, I could easily imagine that even students who didn't think very well of Amiko Yurugase at heart would also describe her like that.

However, if this is all it is, this is just a normal power struggle that happens in any

classroom anywhere in Japan–a community maintained by a precarious balance of power. It fluctuates from time to time, but that's just a way of balancing itself; and that experience is even treated as something necessary to step out into society–in a word, that "there are many kinds of people".

Rather than concentrating power in just one person, it's better to disperse it between two or three people in order to hedge the risk–but, that balance is always right on the brink of dispute. If there's a change, it all comes crashing down. It was like that in the class I'd belonged to two years ago.

Norika Kyakufuji seemed like a member of the Lily Suzubayashi faction (or rather, with her gentle and peaceful demeanor, she wouldn't get along well with a rough girl like Amiko Yurugase; although, the person herself seemed to intend to be neutral), so I couldn't quite swallow all of what she said, and however much it's necessary to keep the class balance in mind when thinking about this… Comparing her story with each of the conversations I'd had with Amiko Yurugase and Lily Suzubayashi, what happened in that classroom just before I transferred appeared to be this kind of affair.

Well, if I call it an affair, that would imply that something underhanded happened… Anyway, this is where Ayakari Hatamoto makes her appearance.

The girl who hadn't come to school the day before Amiko Yurugase began her continued

absences–I didn't know her face, since I'd only seen her name on the seating chart.

Norika Kyakufuji hadn't said much about her either–I thought that she'd become taciturn because Ayakari Hatamoto was a crucial part of the story, but that's not it; the truth appeared to be that she simply didn't know much about Ayakari Hatamoto's nature.

Somehow, it seemed that Ayakari Hatamoto was bad with social life, and had a tendency for isolation–it was a story I'd heard somewhere before, but no doubt it'll prove to be foreshadowing for the situation from now on.

I don't say 'tendency' for isolation to shade the truth with a euphemism; she wasn't, in fact, completely isolated. Ayakari Hatamoto had almost no friends in class, but the one single exception was her close relationship with Amiko Yurugase.

They were childhood friends, or something.

… I greatly despise words like 'childhood friend', but anyway, since Ayakari Hatamoto was bad at socializing, having a thick connection with the most powerful member of the class, Amiko Yurugase, ensured that she had a decent place in the classroom.

But still, it's not what you say, it's how you say it–I couldn't help but carry some considerable misgivings; it seemed like their relationship was a bit distorted, but well, even I'm not conservative enough to deny a

friendship that so brazenly ignored the class hierarchy.

If nothing had happened, it'd have been fine, and even if something happened, it wouldn't become a serious matter if it could be dealt with properly–however, something did happen, Amiko Yurugase hadn't dealt with it well, and it became a serious matter.

Norika Kyakufuji had told me about the whole sequence of events in some detail, but while I was listening (to what I'd asked about myself) I'd gotten fed up and started ignoring her halfway–to summarize, one day, Amiko Yurugase and Ayakari Hatamoto had a big fight.

Well, it was fierce enough that it evidently ought to be called a big fight, but it wasn't a two-sided affair as that expression implies; it appears that the whole time, Amiko Yurugase was the one verbally abusing Ayakari Hatamoto.

So no matter how deep their childhood friendship was, in the end the balance of power was quite clear–well, after all, "friends as equals" is the height of delusion. Though you might say that if two friends hate each other just a little bit, that builds an even stronger friendship–and in the first place, it's not unusual for a relationship between friends to be in danger of breaking down sometimes.

That's what I think.

Norika Kyakufuji told me the reason for their fight as well, but since it was just ridiculously insignificant from my

perspective, I've decided to leave it out (if I may make a small self-reference, it was a bit vulgar)–anyway, the friendship between those two girls fell to ruin.

It'd been ripped apart at the seam, and it couldn't be mended.

The reason why she couldn't pass this off as just an everyday affair was that their quarrel had a lasting effect, and it didn't end as an interpersonal problem–the entire class felt its aftereffects.

The next day onward, Ayakari Hatamoto began staying home from school–she'd said it was some kind of cold, but anyone could see plainly that the cause lay in the relentless, angry bellowing she'd received from Amiko Yurugase the previous day.

She'd driven her friend, her longtime friend of all things, into not attending school. She'd thrust away someone in a weak position from her strong position–plenty sufficient reason for the downfall of the class's most powerful member, Amiko Yurugase.

Sufficient, eh?

That's what I was thinking, strangely, as an outsider–rather, it's a little closer to the truth to say that the swirling discontent with Amiko Yurugase's tyranny used this as a pretext to erupt. At the very least, there's no doubt that Lily Suzubayashi and the students close to her saw this as a suitable opportunity to kick down their rival.

Thus, they isolated Amiko Yurugase.

It wasn't her tendency, it was a conspicuous, genuine isolation that even a transfer student could see.

She'd fallen from a position of popularity in the class, and since that tumble was an experience I had myself, it didn't altogether feel like just someone else's problem–in my case, it got to the point where I shut myself away from the world for several years. Although, her circumstances are quite different, and I'm sure Amiko Yurugase wouldn't want to be lumped together with someone like me–even so, it wasn't hard to imagine that her school life from then on has been unbearably more painful.

The reason she'd turned me away like that must have been that she didn't want an innocent utsider like me getting nonchalantly involved with this–in that regard, she certainly doesn't seem like a very tyrannical person.

But, there's no doubt that from the next day onward, she'd used me as an excuse to start staying home from school, so it's difficult to thank her–as a formerly powerful, formerly popular member of the class, it didn't seem like her pride would have allowed her to start being truant like Ayakari Hatamoto after being isolated herself, but it stands to reason that she'd reluctantly used escaping from an irritating transfer student as a reason to feign illness.

After all, something like that is just an excuse to yourself; but I for one thoroughly know the importance of excuses to oneself.

If the reason our classmates began being excessively kind to me after that was as an act of compensation for their guilty conscience over isolating Amiko Yurugase, and driving her into truancy the same way she'd driven Ayakari Hatamoto away, then her excuse would only be effective for herself–no, in the end, it might just be a deception only she herself couldn't see through.

Whatever it was, the recent state of the class was like the cheerful school life I'd dreamed about before transferring; but there are quite a few heavy problems with interpreting this affair as a petty, trifling argument between children.

The power balance between Amiko Yurugase and Ayakari Hatamoto, and then, the composition of the entire class as a vast majority in opposition to Amiko Yurugase–the undefyable difference in power between the two sides perfectly satisfies the requisite conditions for classroom mayhem. If it's reached the point where two students are being truant, all the more so–it's left the range in which they could just let it go… and still, there might be a different reason why all those boys and girls were entertaining an outsider like me.

They brought me into the community because they were afraid if they didn't make me an "accomplice", as an outsider who witnessed their deeds, I'd become a complainant. I don't know much about it, but

children these days wouldn't be ignorant of that information.

Children don't lack self-awareness as children.

I hadn't thought it would come to this–at least, that's what Norika Kyakufuji had said, but I wonder about that, it's a bit suspicious. I have no doubt that my previous classmates likely said that same line about me.

It's true that Amiko Yurugase dealt with Ayakari Hatamoto high-handedly, and when she'd been isolated in karmic retribution, there's no way people didn't proudly say things like, "Serves you right," with plenty of ill will throughout the classroom–it certainly wasn't unexpected that the festering danger within the class could be exposed.

The foreshadowing was simply being followed up.

That's what I think, as a pioneer of those circumstances.

If this were an old fairy tale, this might be a good time to sum it up with, "Everyone got their just desserts, and they lived happily ever after"; however, Ayakari Hatamoto and Amiko Yurugase, not to mention other members of the class like Norika Kyakufuji and Lily Suzubayashi, none of them are characters in a fairy tale, they're real people with prospects for the future.

Those boys and girls had raised the banner of revolt with the belief they were victims, and now that they'd all become perpetrators, they were trembling like cowards with fear of being reproached and

punished–and in some way, they might be wishing for it.

Don't gloss over that.

Because everyone, *everyone*, knows the truth of how much easier it is to be a victim.

018

I simply couldn't know what kind of reaction Amiko Yurugase would show to my series of cowardly scouting missions unless I stopped talking, but on the other hand, whether or not I could safely stop talking was an unknown variable. Regardless of whether this ends up a mountain or a molehill, either way I'm sure there'll be some kind of calamity.[26] The most likely possibility is that she scowls and leaves her seat, but ultimately, she listened to my story until the very end without interrupting.

And in so doing, rendered me quite perplexed.

She kept silent, but I began feeling like she was reproaching me through her silence–I was trying to put things in order by telling my story, but in the end, it could only be interpreted as wanting to avoid responsibility for causing Amiko Yurugase's continued absences. I threatened Norika Kyakufuji in order to avoid responsibility; that's not all, in order to validate my excuses, I'd rudely, shamelessly set foot in Amiko Yurugase's private space.

"I was worried about you," my ass.

I was just worried about myself–like always.

So even if Amiko Yurugase shouted foul-mouthed abuse at me here, I resigned myself to accept it; however, she didn't do anything of the sort.

Perhaps Amiko Yurugase had learned her lesson with Ayakari Hatamoto, and so she couldn't take a strong step forward with me. Now that I think about it, even when she'd gotten up close to me on the roof last week, she'd had a poor endgame.

So, in her mental state, my fickle listening comprehension wasn't a joke at all.

Well, unexpectedly, that's what it's like when things don't go well in life–since it's me saying so, and nothing has ever gone well in my life, I'm sure that it's true.

Sitting in the fast food restaurant, the awkward silence continued to the point where I began feeling anxious despite myself, but when I started thinking I should get going soon, Amiko Yurugase broke the silence. 'Why do they only say such normal stuff,' Amiko Yurugase muttered listlessly.

'They'? Is she talking about the classmates who toppled her, and isolated her? That's what I thought, but I was completely wrong. Somehow, it seemed her hostility was directed at commentators who appear on TV.

Whenever an incident occurs that troubles society, they invariably say the same thing–do they not have any individuality?–isn't it embarrassing to appear on TV and publicly display your lack of personality?–insults like that started gushing out as if from a burst dam.

It was easier to hear than insults directed at me, but it still wasn't very pleasant to sit and listen to a stream of abuse anyway. Since I don't watch much TV, I don't even know

what kinds of everyday stuff commentators talk about.

What is this, gossip?

Is Amiko Yurugase belatedly trying to nurture her friendship with me? It'd be fairly prejudiced to say that excitedly badmouthing someone is an effective way to get closer to a fellow girl (and anyway, I'm usually the one receiving the insults, so I can't really judge how accurate that is), but maybe Amiko Yurugase intended to put that idea into practice.

She wasn't. (Fufu, I already knew that nobody would want to be friends with me. I know that.)

In short, she'd desperately wanted to complain about the "stereotypical views" rampant in society, so there was no helping it–there's no particular reason for me to side with the commentators, but if I had to say, isn't it generally correct in most cases to say the normal thing?

At the very least, the normal opinion is the opinion of the majority–though, justice according to majority rule is still cruel, always cruel, forever cruel.

Shrugging her shoulders at my bad mood (I have a nasty habit of wanting to refute whatever people say to me. That's why I can't make any friends), Amiko Yurugase finished up her discourse on television–'Well, ya investigation got all the details right,' she said, returning to the main topic.

'It's my fault I got isolated. It'd be bettah if ya left me alone–why aya gettin involved with me, transfah?'

Since her accent seemed especially strong even compared to others in the area, for the most part, I could only make conjectures about what she meant from her facial expressions; but once again, it appeared that Amiko Yurugase was trying to push me away.

I have a tendency to become intoxicated by my own cynicism, but well, even if we both had an experience of falling from power, this girl is different from me; it's not like she was a bad person by nature.

Amiko Yurugase isn't evil.

Driving a classmate into truancy is something that ought to be publicly condemned as evil, and it's completely indefensible, but if it's fine to persecute her "because she's evil", that'd end up implying that "there's a problem with being ostracized".

She's a problem child, so it's fine to mistreat her.

It's intended as discipline.

My goodness, I'm truly thankful for your guidance and encouragement!

…A long time ago, I lost all of my righteous indignation and my personal grudges, and even if I get very angry, I don't feel bitter. So while I understand what Amiko Yurugase wants to say, I haven't thought the same things myself.

I was actually an outrageous problem child, and I know that's how the world works.

So the only thing I hate is Araragi, the man far beyond the limits of the world.

To me, forgiving that man means losing everything–Koyomi Araragi is my everything.

Don't take it from me.

Just like how it's fine in general society for the strong to do whatever they like to the weak, and for the evil to do whatever they like to people who are small in number, I can think whatever I want about Koyomi Araragi–while I was thinking about that, Amiko Yurugase looked at me with suspicion.

I got flustered thinking about how I'd introduce Araragi to her if she asked, but what if she was going to ask me to relay this dispute to the staff room and get it taken up by TV news, I wonder how much of a scolding I'd receive…

I couldn't say.

Now that the problem has produced two truant students, the staff room would already have grasped the situation, right? And the reason they haven't come out and settled it is that they're tacitly consenting.

I didn't know.

At this critical time, is that what they intend to do?

It's the same as it was with me.

Once a problem comes to light, it's the same if it gets picked up by TV news–however, even if the media sets itself upon a solution, if they look into the situation of Amiko Yurugase being driven to truancy after driving Ayakari Hatamoto in truancy, I don't

think they could say anything particularly forceful.

But I don't know for certain.

If someone lights a fire, society won't rest until they've driven the perpetrator to the point of hanging themselves–and then everyone, with one voice, will talk like the virtuous and peaceful Norika Kyakufuji.

'I don't understand why it's come to this.'

They didn't intend for it to happen–so, what exactly did they intend?

Each and every one of them strings together the same exact complaints as the perpetrator. You can tell at a glance it's the same as the perpetrator, even if you weren't looking closely.

For that reason, setting aside using me as an excuse, you could say that becoming truant herself and sharing the same pain as Ayakari Hatamoto was the better choice for Amiko Yurugase–there was a risk that it would be interpreted as running from her responsibility, but you could see that our classmates' guilt for isolating her was even bigger.

'I don't understand,' Amiko Yurugase said, heating up as she was speaking, like she was getting a bit into high spirits. 'Why would someone start stayin home from school just cause they got yelled at little, I don't understand at all.' I couldn't see any sign of remorse in that line, but seeing that my reaction was bad and therefore purposefully saying something provocative, that was something I of all people understood–even

me, Sodachi Oikura, who truly can't understand people at all. Perhaps she felt guilty over irresponsibly staying home from school, and wanted me to rebut and strongly reproach her, but unfortunately, if that's the case then the only thing I can say is that she picked the wrong person.

I'm the least qualified girl in the world to reproach another person, so I have no choice but to betray her expectation. I was at my limit just replying with, 'Well, school isn't the kind of place you want to go anyway, right.'

I'm wearing a uniform, and I've had a face like a high school girl since I was born, but in fact, even totaling the time I spent at Naoetsu High School, I've really only attended high school for about one semester.

When it comes to truancy, even adding Amiko Yurugase and Ayakari Hatamoto's together, it's still nothing compared with mine.

Far from a double score.

The sole reason I advanced to the third year and I'm even set to graduate is simply due to the kind consideration of the staff at Naoetsu High School… So when it comes to staying home from school, I'm something of an expert.

I've held the conversation here so far as if truancy is some kind of big problem, but honestly, it's not like I didn't feel like at least this level of truancy wasn't such a problem in the first place.

Amiko Yurugase could study at cram school anyway, and I studied by myself at

home–though I don't know what Ayakari Hatamoto is doing.

You commonly hear that school isn't just a place for studies, but if that's the case, if all you do is study, then it's definitely better not to go at all.

Well, I'd been admonished in an exemplary fashion to 'at least finish high school' by the Hakobe couple, but that's not how the world works–there's no helping its twisted logic.

Amiko Yurugase listened to my shallow advice without showing any emotion–I wonder why it is, I know about Amiko Yurugase's circumstances, and that should have made us closer than when we'd had our exchange on the roof, but now it's like our gears aren't meshing together at all.

I suppose that's to be expected.

I can't tell her a single thing she wanted me to say. I can't fulfill her needs even a little bit. But even so, do I still have to say it to her after all?

Even if it's the standard, hypocritical thing to say, even if it's the normal thing to say.

Even knowing that it's a lie.

'It's not your fault.'

019

Finally, when she got up to leave, Amiko Yurugase threw a word of apology at me in a voice so small it was almost silent. It was a whispered, utterly rough "sorry"–she seemed hesitant, and it must have been one word she really was not inclined to say.

Well, from her view, I was an inflexible, tactless claimant who'd come to attack her for playing hookey; however, she might have felt obliged to apologize for making me feel her pain, after being made to feel the pain of Ayakari Hatamoto herself. So even if she'd had a prior engagement to return to, maybe she'd thought that the conversation couldn't be settled unless she apologized.

'Ohoho, please don't worry yourself, it's nothing that needs be forgiven'–it'd be good if I had the capability to amicably settle things like that, but a dazed, twitching smile was all my low-capacity mind could handle.

With that, Amiko Yurugase clicked her tongue and headed back toward the cram school–likely to continue the study session that I'd rudely intruded upon.

She might be aiming for a pretty good university.

If that's the case, since she'd want to devote herself to studying, surely she'd made the right choice to stop attending a jumbled up, complicated high school, and avoiding friends and romance and group behavior and joint responsibility and stuff like that–in any case, it would be absurd to urge her to attend

school with reasoning like, “Because I’m a bit uncomfortable.”

No matter what, there’s no reason for her to distort her own life for my sake–or for the sake of Ayakari Hatamoto, for that matter.

In this situation, even if you couldn’t call it a resolution, it’d certainly be a breakthrough if she made up with Amiko Yurugase and started attending school again; but Ayakari Hatamoto has no obligation to do such a thing for my sake, or even for Amiko Yurugase’s sake.

I could only imagine how domineering and dictatorial Amiko Yurugase was to Ayakari Hatamoto, but her truancy is different from Amiko Yurugase’s and my sulking style of non-attendance; you could even say that she’d mustered her courage in sincere protest–it wouldn’t be easy for her to back down.

Since the calculation for required attendance days was the same for Ayakari Hatamoto, it’s highly likely that she’ll persist in being absent until the end of term, and then until graduation day.

In that case, no matter how guilty Norika Kyakufuji feels, no matter how much chilling uneasiness hangs in the air, that classroom will continue on normally without anything changing.

I’ve tried all day to get something done, but far from receiving any kind of reward, I’d lost something instead.

I’ve just about lost any potential friendship with Norika Kyakufuji, and I’ve lost the

lifestyle of a pampered, popular person in class–from now on, what awaits me is a solitary youth, where I don't speak with anyone for my whole day.

I'll pass this next month in not just a simple state of isolation, but constantly bearing my classmates' frowns like walking on a bed of nails–if I hadn't done anything, things would be so much better, and not doing anything would have been the right thing to do.

Though, having said that, if I ended up not going to school because of this (anyway, as an expert on being truant, I wasn't resistant to the idea), if the number of absentees in class increased to three, it'd be quite likely for the school to step in.

If they learned about the situation, they ought to be willing to take up the problem in this delicate end-of-year period for exam students–but I began feeling hopeless even thinking about how they'd deal with the whole class being perpetrators.

Of course, I didn't at all feel inclined to sacrifice myself and live a lonely youth for the sake of the futures of classmates with whom my only relationship was being pampered a little bit, but I didn't want to get sucked into that kind of trouble–I'd even thought, *I should just wreck it all*; that idea's origins were unclear, likely based in my irritation, but it was a desire so ruinous it could only be diffused by beating my mental Araragi to a pulp.

Well, fine.

I didn't think I could lead an enjoyable high school life in the first place.

Making lots of friends, or getting a lovely boyfriend… I'm not such a megalomaniac as to entertain those delusions. I thought it'd take longer than just under a week after I transferred for something like this to happen–it exceeds even my pessimistic imagination, but this is fine. It's better to have an unpleasant result come sooner rather than later.

Now that it's come to this, contrarily, I started thinking that it's fine however much I'm isolated.

I get it, I get it, everyone.

If you want to make me concentrate on my studies that much, the traitorous Oikura will all but answer your wishes. When the end-of-term exams come around in December, I'll beat you all with perfect scores on every test, even the arts. You'll be left dumbfounded by this girl you all shunned.

Savor that defeat twice over.

No, no, despite being shunned, I'll dress up meaninglessly in cute clothes, I'll dye my hair brown and cut it short, and then, getting the best grades in school, I'll deliver you a threefold humiliation.

As an unexpected result, or rather a side effect, at long last, in the winter of my 18th year, I received a sign that I was awakening to a twisted kind of style sense.

I could scarcely believe what happened next; as if to say *You really think you have a sense of style?*, the next event to unfold, as

well as an even more woeful event to unfold
were lying in wait for me–even though there
are only eleven ways to fold a cube, my
resolve never bears fruit, does it.

020

Even if I'm continuously astonished by the series of unfortunate events visited upon me, I have no intention of acting like a tragic heroine. I don't deny that I have a bad habit of getting drunk off my own masochism, but at most I consider myself simply a supporting character in someone else's tragedy–I've hardly even been the main character in my own life.

I'm not a person to get intoxicated with the pretense of being a troublemaker–I'll leave the role of tragic heroine to someone more like Norika Kyakufuji.

My life is a succession of tragedies from which you'd want to avert your eyes, but not because I'm a special person–because I act foolishly.

I act like a fool, so I suffer like a fool.

I silently, stoically endure it; and while waiting to be saved by a gentle, kindhearted person, I can't help but *do* something.

I got myself into my current circumstance by acting foolishly too–if I'd just hung my head in disappointment and quietly returned to the Hakobe house, then I wouldn't have plunged carelessly into that terribly awkward scene at the cram school.

At any rate, I'm an unrelated supporting character.

I'm like an actor whose turn was over, but I failed to leave the stage; my objections did nothing but bother the playwright.

While I was visiting the cram school, searching for Amiko Yurugase, getting dragged away, and talking and listening to her as best I could without finding much common ground, night had completely fallen.

There was dinner to take care of, and I really should have gone home right away–however, at the last moment, I sorted my jumbled thoughts about deciding to be isolated, and made up my mind to enjoy my solitary high school life from now on.

So, for the first time in my life, I set foot in an establishment called a 'game center' on my way home–a popular gathering place.

I'd heard that cool high school girls were partial to taking pictures in the photo booths at these places. Now, in the height of the smart phone age, people should be free to take pictures as much as they like, but I'm sure the reason these photography machines have remained popular is that there's an uncommon appeal to them. That's what I'd thought up till now.

I don't have money to waste on games, but surely it's fine to snap one picture to commemorate the start of my isolation–with my heart thumping as if I was doing something much worse than trespass in a cram school, I heaved open the door to the game center and stepped into the gaudy, reverberating music.

It was a detour for so-called relaxation, or distraction, but right from the start, it seemed that this great adventure of a course change was, unusually, the right decision.

My nervous feelings about all these new experiences were blown away–why was that? Well, in this photography machine called a 'photo booth', you could manually direct it to retouch the subject's facial expression.

Retouch my facial expression!? It can retouch *this* face!?

I couldn't stop a thin smile from spreading across my face. If I might dare to speak against my human nature, all of my worries (besides Araragi) became inconsequential. Even Amiko Yurugase and Ayakari Hatamoto vanished with a whiff from inside my head–is it possible that this narrow-minded way of seeing things, which might be called the symbol of my very being, could be changed not just in the picture, but in actuality as well?

I see. If it's been endowed with such a noble feature, even in an age where anyone could become an amateur cameraman, it's not at all strange that these machines wouldn't have fallen from popularity… it could even remove this complex I've had for decades.

If both of my eyes were open wide, glittering and sparkling, wouldn't my failure of a life turn into something completely different? There I was, trying to substantiate that delusion, trembling with joy.

However, that joy was naturally transient–of course, I wasn't bottlenecked by the price. My eyes nearly jumped out of their sockets at the price of one per 500 yen, and confronted by such an exorbitantly high price just to

alter the look on my face, my swollen excitement subsided all at once, but even so, after a brief period of agonizing, I just barely held my ground.

Settling for just one picture, it was the first time in my life I'd allowed an investment in myself–or in other words, wasting money on myself.

I've changed.

No, well, I certainly understand that nothing has changed in my life as a result of my eyes getting retouched in a photograph, but right now, this kind of reformation seemed like just what I needed.

In the end, I couldn't even speculate on whether that intuition was correct or mistaken, and it became an eternal mystery–I didn't enter the photography booth.

That is to say, I didn't have any small change on hand, so I had to break up a 1000 yen bill at the money-changing machine in order to make 500 yen.

Shaking my head at why none of the photo booths could give change like a vending machine, I started moving toward where the money-changing machine was installed (I could at least get to the money-changing machine), but as soon as I lined up, I panicked, jumped back, and hid behind a pillar.

Since it was a fairly reflexive action, I almost didn't know why I'd done it myself, but when my thoughts caught up, the reason became obvious–I'd caught sight of faces I knew in line in front of me.

I'd thought to myself, wow, to come across people I knew in this game center that I'd entered for the purpose of transforming myself, what a coincidence! But it's simply because this place is like a playground where fellow students meet up–indeed, the students over there were from Shishikurasaki High School.

Moreover, it the class leader, Lily Suzubayashi, and a group of the people close to her, including boys.

Hrm. Even outside of school, I can recognize classmates… Now that I think about it, it was the same with Amiko Yurugase–maybe it's because they all wear their uniforms even outside of school.

Since I have a weak sense of belonging to both Naoetsu High School and Shishikurasaki High School, I didn't really have any special attachment to my uniform, but for normal high school students, uniforms could be an aspect of their identity.

Well, it's possible that like me, they're just wearing uniforms because they're on their way home from school, but… If that's true, since she's not wearing a jersey, wouldn't that mean Lily Suzubayashi didn't have club activities today? No, well, of course she wouldn't stop by a game center wearing a jersey…

My thoughts were jumbling around in circles at this unexpected encounter; however, now that it's come to this, there's only one thing for me to do.

I've got to run away as soon as possible.

Really, getting into such an uplifting mood was just a portent for the worst possible situation to befall me right afterward, wasn't it!

My mind was seized by those shameful thoughts, but thinking about it carefully, there's not a single reason why I have to run away here.

Even if it feels like an unforgivable crime, even a person like me is at least guaranteed the right to come to a game center.

It's not like there are laws restricting me from having fun.

I can openly have fun.

I don't have to be timid in front of classmates living out a glamorous youth, coming here after school in a mixed group of boys and girls–I can just put on a calm face, even exchange a small look, and just pass them by.

Actually, since my period of "being pampered" had come to an end after I'd recklessly bullied Norika Kyakufuji, even if they noticed me, wouldn't they just blatantly ignore me? Or rather, since it's been such a short time since I transferred, perhaps they wouldn't recognize me as a fellow member of the class unless they got close and asked who I was.

But ultimately, Sodachi Oikura won't be bullied into following so-called logical reasoning. Whenever I encounter a situation I'm not prepared to deal with, I can think of no other options besides "running away."

However, this time, I ought to have taken the illogical action. That would have been the appropriate choice. Just like my spinal reflex had urged me, I ought to have run away as fast as I could.

If I had, I'd have gotten through this without hearing it.

If I'd broken into a dash, I'd have magnificently evaded what happened next– but I was too slow, and couldn't escape.

I could say I was being cautious, worrying that my footsteps would give me away if I ran, but since the music resounding throughout this place was so loud, did that consideration really mean anything?

No, maybe it did.

Because even through all of this music, I could pick out Lily Suzubayashi's voice addressing the classmate next to her– Hatamoto.

Hatamoto? Ayakari Hatamoto?

021

I'd quarreled with Lily Suzubayashi in front of the school gate, and besides, she'd given off a strong impression of a class leader, but… naturally, it's not like I could match all of my classmates' names to faces after just five days of being a transfer student.

So I'd assumed that the one unknown girl in the group was just "Ms. So-and-so from our class"–but somehow or other, she appeared to be none other than Ayakari Hatamoto herself, the girl who was truant before I'd even transferred.

Seeing her hanging out and having fun at a game center conflicted greatly with my mental image of her as a truant, but after hearing her surname being called many times after that by people other than Lily Suzubayashi, she could hardly be anyone else.

Well, fine.

Of course, this doesn't matter.

I don't intend to assert an irrational, superficial, prejudiced argument, like that it's terribly imprudent for her to be hanging out and having fun with classmates after faking an illness and staying home from school. It's not illegal for her to have fun, just like it's not illegal for me. While I wasn't going to school, I'd just about shut myself away from the world, but that's just a problem with my personality; I just couldn't live a cheerful lifestyle. Ordinarily, people have to find a way

to reduce the frustration that piles up with the irregularities in their lives. There's no essential difference between Amiko Yurugase studying at cram school and Ayakari Hatamoto hanging out at a game center.

After breaking up her friendship with Amiko Yurugase, Ayakari Hatamoto had gotten closer to Lily Suzubayashi and her group; that's certainly not something that could be taken as a betrayal.

It's completely fine for her to have fun.

However, if Ayakari Hatamoto and Lily Suzubayashi started talking in lively voices about how they'd driven Amiko Yurugase into truancy, like it was some kind of accomplishment, things would become a little bit different–if they'd gathered at this amusement center as if to celebrate their achievement.

Ah, nah.

To tell the truth, I did think it would be natural for Ayakari Hatamoto to say "Serves you right" after hearing that Amiko Yurugase had become a truant like herself–it'd be wrong to force an excessively ethical viewpoint onto her and say that she had to feel guilty about anything. It's an ethical viewpoint that a nation ought to have, but it's all but impossible for an individual. Yet if everything was an intentional contrivance of theirs, it's a different story.

Well, saying that "everything" was a contrivance is just my typical assumption–there's no way for me to know how much of it

was accidental and how much was intentional just from eavesdropping like this.

I'm sure it's closer to the truth to look at Amiko Yurugase and Ayakari Hatamoto's quarrel as the result of many years' worth of dregs accidentally overflowing–there's a delicate line between whether her staying home from school the next day was due to malicious intent or not.

But what if Lily Suzubayashi had incited those two incidents to further her interests against Amiko Yurugase–setting Amiko Yurugase up as the villain and isolating her, while taking the truant Ayakari Hatamoto into her corner at the same time? Making Ayakari Hatamoto continue staying home to prevent a reconciliation–contrasting herself with Amiko Yurugase's tyranny, and thereby settling her isolation?

Or perhaps Lily Suzubayashi hadn't led her on, but Ayakari Hatamoto, who ought to have been bad with people, had made a deal with Lily Suzubayashi–what if Ayakari Hatamoto, dissatisfied with how Amiko Yurugase was treating her, had used the bellowing she'd received as an opportunity to finally bring about a revolution?

Of course, there were more possibilities–there might be a mastermind in that group controlling things from the shadows, or as an extreme argument following a twisted logic, I couldn't rule out the hypothesis that someone outside of the group like Norika Kyakufuji was leading them all around by the nose.

As a transfer student and an outsider, I couldn't understand the exact situation, it was unfathomable–all I could produce from casually eavesdropping was speculation.

But even if there are some approximations, it was the unshakable truth that Ayakari Hatamoto had colluded with Lily Suzubayashi to trick Amiko Yurugase.

The more I listened, the more unshakable it became.

The more I listened to those girls lording it over their cohort, talking as if they hadn't a speck of guilt–the more I listened to their spite, to the point where I didn't want to listen any more, the more unshakable it became.

Ah–gah.

Why did I end up hearing this.

After running this way and that, I 'd thought it was all finally over–I didn't even want to know the truth.

Even if I can't say I was fully satisfied, things should have been settled by my conversation with Amiko Yurugase–why are they trying to pull me into this sordid quagmire?

No, Lily Suzubayashi and Ayakari Hatamoto aren't trying to pull me into anything–to those girls, I'm simply a supporting character. Setting aside the question of whether it's a tragedy or a comedy, those two had no intention to do anything at all to me.

So I wasn't being pulled into the sordid quagmire, I dove into it myself–I really

shouldn't do things that aren't like me. I've met with this terrible turn of events because I did something like enter a game center–so from now on, I'll act more like myself.

Impulsively, hysterically, reflexively.

Sodachi Oikura's standard style.

The modest personality of a fool like me.

What's normal for a non-special person like me.

I flew out from behind the pillar–not to run away; on the contrary, I plunged into the group of students at full speed.

My target was Lily Suzubayashi.

If I considered everyone in the group to be accomplices, then it wouldn't matter who I was aiming for–other than Ayakari Hatamoto–but in the end, the best target was the girl whom even an outsider could perceive as a leader.

It's not that I'm letting my rage take over and trying to sock her. To tell the truth, I was fired up and behaving incomprehensibly enough that I wanted to do just that; however, I just barely managed to hold onto my senses–indeed, I held onto enough of my senses to aim for the smartphone Lily Suzubayashi was fiddling with as she amused herself chatting.

I plunged into the line for the money-changing machine like a runaway car that lost its brakes, and, hearing the boys and girls around me scream, I successfully snatched the digital device from Lily Suzubayashi's hands.

Mission complete.

Or not, since this is only the start–I can't stop here, I'm hopelessly outnumbered.

Maintaining top speed, I headed toward the exit at the other side of the game center–well, I say 'top speed', but the dashing speed of a former truant and hikikomori didn't amount to very much.

I can't sustain this, and I'll use up all of my endurance soon.

I need to put as much distance between me and them as possible, and accomplish my next goal while they're still taken aback.

Coming out of an alleyway, almost without thinking I circled around to the back of a nearby convenience store and crouched down–then, I hid inside a garbage bin installed next to a vending machine.

A masochistic smile escaped me. Relying on a garbage bin on a byroad at a time like this is quite like me–it's like I'm a genuine piece of garbage.

But, you people are even more garbage than me.

Muttering those words out loud, I started operating the smartphone in my hand–I didn't own one, but the operating procedures fell within the bounds of common sense. It's not like you needed an instruction manual for this kind of handheld device in the first place.

First, most importantly, I activated airplane mode.

It seemed that cell phone companies these days could use security procedures to find phones' specific location and remotely erase all their data–but if you cut off the signal and put it in standalone mode, that security procedure is rendered meaningless.

Should be.

It's not like I had any confirmation of that, and it wouldn't be odd for me to be found by Lily Suzubayashi and her group as they searched the area after coming to their senses, so I can't afford to be leisurely. I was confident that they wouldn't report me, but there were a lot of people on their side… unlike me, they could perform a wide-scale search operation.

It's already too late to get off with an apology.

Now that I've started, my only choice is to finish it.

After setting the smartphone in airplane mode, I slid it open and tried to unlock it; however, as I'd thought, it required a password.

Ah, of course.

I need to input a four-digit number.

I felt cold sweat trickle down my cheek–perhaps it might be a tear.

I couldn't turn the testimony I'd heard while eavesdropping into proof. Since I didn't have a cell phone myself, I couldn't display any modern detective skills like recording their conversation or secretly snapping pictures.

But that's because I'm a behind-the-times hick from the country–to all these city kids, smartphones were almost like a part of their bodies.

Part of their bodies–part of their brains.

If Lily Suzubayashi and Ayakari Hatamoto had joined hands to plot the downfall of Amiko Yurugase, then there's no way they didn't use smartphones as a communication tool for that purpose at some point.

Whether they were text messages or SNS or SMS or group chats or whatever–this phone is full of evidence.

Because of the internet and smartphones, middle and high school students' interpersonal relationships have become complicated, digitized, vicious and devious and such, and it seems to have become a problem for society–but on the other hand, using digital devices left unavoidable traces; 100 percent certain proof.

Anonymity isn't worth it, so it seems.

If you succeeded in analyzing someone's smartphone, afterward, one thing leads to another–just like that, an entire group could be destroyed.

Since they understood that, cell phone security was fundamentally rather rigid–that's why it could be guarded by remote operation, and why, depending on the configuration, I'd heard there was a feature that would reset the device if you entered too many wrong passwords.

Even if that's not the case, there's no way I'd have time to try out all 10,000+ potential

numbers. I had to unlock Lily Suzubayashi's smartphone in one go–if I can't, it's all over.

After taking back her smartphone; in other words, after ensuring the safety of her and her group, Lily Suzubayashi might mercilessly hand me over to the police.

In a sense, I'm a fugitive on the run, who's done even more questionable things than steal a cell phone, so that's a situation I'd absolutely want to avoid.

A four-digit number. One out of ten thousand.

As the incarnation of misfortune and disaster, I'd probably get it wrong even if it were a fifty-fifty chance–even if it were a chance of 9,999 out of 10,000, I'm confident I'd still get it wrong. However…

Then there was an intense noise. The garbage bin that had served as my protector had been sent flying with a rough kick–the empty cans and plastic bottles pounded against me as they scattered.

As I was protecting my face with my arms, I saw the form of a male student blocking my way, with a facial expression like a demon–he called out to his comrades in a loud voice. In the blink of an eye, the entire group, including Lily Suzubayashi and Ayakari Hatamoto, had assembled and surrounded me.

I thought for some reason that the number of people had increased from when I'd seen them at the game center… I suppose they'd called everyone to gather here.

It's so wonderful, having lots of friends.

Although they didn't get physically violent, the boys and girls didn't hesitate to start laying into me with words of merciless ridicule–it's almost like they want to hurt me.

I'm getting hurt, though.

No matter how full of scars I am, I still feel pain when I get hurt–that's why I can't forgive people who pretend to be hurt, who pretend to be pitiful, who use weakness as a weapon.

I can't forgive anyone who's even more feckless than me.

In the middle of the storm of abuse, in a louder voice than ever, Lily Suzubayashi inquired, 'What the hell aya doin'–it was a much more violent tone than Amiko Yurugase's.

It seemed like a question that could finally start a conversation; however, instead of replying, I returned the same question to her, 'What are you doing?'

The smartphone screen I showed her while answering was more than enough–it was unlocked, a communication app was running, and the screen showed that I'd finished my analysis.

Everyone fell silent. Especially Ayakari Hatamoto, who went quiet as the color drained from her face–regardless of how violent they'd been, how they'd pretended to have the upper hand by a wide margin, after all, they were normal high school students with decent intelligence.

They seemed to have surmised everything.

My goal in snatching the phone, and the fact that their own goal had been ruined.

…Strictly speaking, there was one way for these boys and girls to turn the tables. Now that they've surrounded me, they could all beat me up and forcibly take the cellphone back–that'd be easy.

But in that case, the affair would turn into something else.

If you people have the resolve for that, it's my loss.

Do as you like. Do as you dislike.

As I let out a cackling laugh, Lily Suzubayashi stared at my defenseless form as if I were an apparition–grinding her teeth in frustration, she yelled, 'What the hell, you on Yurugase's side, huh?'

Yurugase's side? What does that mean… 'Does Amiko Yurugase look like such a virtuous person for you to help her out after I isolated her?'

'If that's the case, you aren't qualified to stand above people either.'

'Hauh? Then whose side aya, huh? Fah whose sake, undah whose influence, based on whose value system aya screwin around like this?'

As she continued relentlessly questioning me in that shrill voice, I got fed up, and thought of a suitable answer.

'Araragi.'

022

As for why I was able to unlock Lily Suzubayashi's smartphone–there's no need for an elaborate explanation. All I did was enter her birthday as a four-digit password, which Amiko Yurugase had so conscientiously included in the personal information she'd provided me.

It's often noted, to the point of leaving a sour taste in one's mouth, that you mustn't use all of the same digit or your birthday as passwords for anything; but it's also often noted to the point of leaving a sour taste in one's mouth that people will never stop doing it.

Well, for the most part, it was a better gamble than inputting a number at random, and while I had a few other candidates if her birthday had been wrong, there's no doubt it was a risky bet–in the worst case, I could have hid the smartphone somewhere and tried to bluff my way out, but I felt relieved from the bottom of my heart that I got through without resorting to negotiations. Because of my hot temper, I'd be even worse at negotiating under that level of suspense.

But of course, this doesn't mean I got lucky; no matter how strong your security is, if the people operating it are lazy and idle, it's easy to break–that's such a mundane principle that I don't even need to refer to the cram school gate check as evidence.

From Lily Suzubayashi's perspective, surely she hadn't expected her enemy Amiko

Yurugase to remember her birthday… whether or not you remember classmates' birthdays has nothing to do with qualifications to be a leader, so that's not a point she ought to regret.

In any case, that was the trick I used to pull through my predicament.

So, about what happened afterward. I'd unofficially indicted the bad guys with incontrovertible proof; but, although I'm glad I did, I decided to give them a chance to become more of a decent person than a grouch like me. A chance I'd received from so many people, but of which I'd never managed to avail myself–I hope from the bottom of my heart that those kids can make use of it.

'Amiko Yurugase is probably still in the self-study room at the cram school, so go and meet up with her right now; I don't care what kind of lies you tell, just make your peace with her. If you do, I'll return the smartphone,' I declared.

As if to confirm her defeat, and at a loss for what to do as a leader, Lily Suzubayashi started moving closer–maybe she heard it as an unreasonable demand; however, taking the current situation into account, it wasn't exactly a lenient ruling.

It's the best ruling from the worst person. Please content yourself with it, and accept it.

Whether that acute insincerity of mine came through or not, Lily Suzubayashi and Ayakari Hatamoto's decisions came quickly–if the other classmates one step away from their position hadn't fully understood the

situation, or if they didn't feel like they were part of the party concerned, they simply followed those two away.

Amiko Yurugase and Lily Suzubayashi.

Amiko Yurugase and Ayakari Hatamoto.

A pair of enemies, and a pair of broken up friends.

While I had endless curiosity about what kind of exchanges and processes occurred in each of their relationships afterward, unfortunately, that falls outside the scope of my concern–and besides, I wasn't really interested. I used up all of my interest in other people's affairs a long time ago.

At any rate, Amiko Yurugase and Ayakari Hatamoto both showed up at school the next day; it seemed like they'd done well acquiring some worldly wisdom–well, even Amiko Yurugase isn't as much an idiot as I am. She certainly hadn't swallowed the story her classmates had told her, but she'd had enough worldly wisdom to give in and get it all over with; she's not as much an idiot as me.

Anyhow, with that, the members of my new class were finally arrayed in their entirety–I can't say whether the atmosphere had returned to how it was before after the hierarchy had been temporarily destroyed, and even if it goes back to how it was after this, well, it probably won't; but cleverly pretending that things are normal while getting on with life is a just a part of youth. That's what I thought, though it just felt like someone else's problem.

Really, it was someone else's problem.

Despite their relationship straining, Amiko Yurugase and Ayakari Hatamoto had gone back to being childhood friends, and Lily Suzubayashi and Amiko Yurugase's diarchal power system had been restored to its superb balance; however, the way they'd treat me had yet to be settled.

Well, of course.

I'd returned her smartphone, but from Lily Suzubayashi's view, I must've seemed like quite the odious pest–and while I'd persisted in pretending not to know anything, from Amiko Yurugase's view, the situation took a sudden turn right after I'd invaded her cram school, so it was impossible for her not to doubt such an exceptionally uncanny coincidence.

I'd even secretly hoped that I might become someone people tipped their hats to in that classroom, but far from tipping their hats, they kept their distance as usual.

In other words, I was the only one whose isolation didn't subside in the least–it got even worse. The involved parties simply looked at me with distrust, as if saying, 'Just what was she trying to achieve?'

All I wanted was to take a picture in the photo booth…

Although I don't think it'd cause any disturbances, of course it'd be hard for me to go to that game center again, so I suppose that modest wish won't come true; so, I could say that the only thing I got out of it was my face getting all the more grim.

I'd rushed out the idea from my mouth the instant I'd thought it, but I suppose that's something I have in common with the Araragi faction… Well, if that man were in my place, I wonder if he'd have brought things to a close more intelligently. It's good I turned on them before they turned on me, but I'd certainly learned from that man the danger of everything being over if they turn on you first.

Anyway, that's the end of it.

This time, I'd been saved by the fact they'd really had a sinister design (so nice of them)–if they hadn't, I don't think I'd have flown out from behind the pillar or anything else. Psychologically speaking, when people see other people who've suffered injuries or have terrible things happen to them, they're able to accept the situation by justifying it in their minds like, "Even the victim had their issues" and "Since such a terrible thing happened to them, they must have done something terrible in a previous life or something"–but this time, I'm glad I chanced upon those kids' garbage sides. Even Amiko Yurugase hadn't been spoken well of after she'd been driven into isolation, and I'm glad this world is so worthless.

Though, of course, the most worthless piece of garbage is me.

If you're unable to obtain anything, it's natural that all you do is lose things.

Ah, well… wait, wait, I certainly can't say that all I do is lose things, or that all I obtained was a worsening of my judgment–

there was one thing, like a byproduct, that even someone like me was able to acquire.

The Hakobe couple couldn't look past the fact that I hadn't made any friends even after starting a new life, so despite my hesitation, they forced a smartphone onto me–my isolation was caused by my lack of communication skills, and it wasn't at all related to my lack of a communication tool like this… but it'd be a lie if I said it didn't make me happy.

Owning a smartphone made me feel more like a high school girl, even if just a little–I started feeling somewhat lighthearted just because of that; I might be obstinate, but my mental makeup really is quite simple.

Naturally, I used a random four-digit number as my password.

Needless to say, my SNS and texting app inboxes, even my address book were just about empty, so actually, there was no need for that much security…

Thinking self-deprecating thoughts like that, telling myself just half a month longer just half a month longer everything will change in a half month, I was heading to school, dragging my feet along in a gloomy gait, when the smartphone unexpectedly rang.

I say that, but the screen was showing the single telephone number in my address book, in other words, the number of the Hakobe house landline.

Did I forget something? Tilting my head, I picked up. The call was from Mrs. Hakobe–it

seems someone had rung the Hakobe house intercom asking for me.

It appeared I had a visitor–my heart skipped a beat.

'I, is it… a boy about the same age as me?'

'A small build, looks like math is his strong suit?'

Bracing myself to the point of embarrassment, I asked her–Mrs. Hakobe promptly denied, 'No, not at all.'

The visitor seemed to be a middle-aged man, completely drunk, even this early in the morning… on top of that, with a slurring, shouting voice, he'd called himself my father.

'Aaalright, I understand. I'll head back riiight now.'

After all, even with that, I'm perfectly all right.

愚物語 するがボーンヘッド

CHAPTER TWO
SURUGA BONEHEAD

001

I cannot remember for the life of me when underclassman Oshino Ougi first appeared. It felt as if we've been together since he transferred, but I don't think there was any catalyst for our amity — if someone were to say it came with time, I'd probably agree. No, I can vaguely remember how I first met that self-proclaimed number one fan of mine if I put my mind to it, but every recollection comes with its own slight variation, or a complete overhaul.

A chance encounter, or an introduction from Hanekawa-senpai, but it wouldn't sound wrong if I said we met via text, and I also think we got familiar with each other through the basketball club… the more I think about it, the more I'm certain we only met yesterday.

It'd probably be better to ask him directly, but whenever I see him with his pitch-dark pupils and his pitch-black grin, my questions just magically go away, even until today.

Eh, what matters isn't the past, it's the present.

For Oshino Ougi's existence doesn't seem a menace.

002

‘Hey, Araragi-senpai, I really don’t want to say this, but haven’t you become a bit careless about cleaning my room recently? I was on the fence over this, but for your sake, allow me to say this: to put it bluntly, you’ve become tardy. If you’re cleaning my room, then please make sure you do it more thoroughly. I thought you were the one who offered to clean up my room, Araragi-senpai? This sort of half-assing is no different from not doing the job at all.’

In response to my loyal words of sincere advice to my saviour, Araragi-senpai flew into a larger fit of rage than I expected, so I ended up doing this month’s cleaning all by myself.

If Araragi-senpai were still in high school, I don’t think he would be so impatient as to reject his junior’s modest advice, but I guess this is what adulthood is all about.

Araragi-senpai is now nineteen years old.

In a different world, that’s the same age as the Nonsense Bearer.

Being left alone aside, I didn’t spend the year just staring at Araragi-senpai while he swept up my room — it is about time to let the world know that Kanbaru Suruga, eighteen years of age, is fully capable of skilfully cleaning her own room.

I say ‘let the world know’, it was more letting grandpa and grandma know — yet in this entire row with Araragi-senpai, I was given a good talking-to from that sweet old

couple. They went about it in stages like a hook turn. I can't believe grandpa and grandma sided with their granddaughter's senior over their own granddaughter… I was truly shocked.

Whatever.

As long as they see my room squeaky clean, grandpa and grandma would be impressed — with that in mind, I furled my sleeves and spent the first day of my last high school summer break not doing my homework, but cleaning my room.

I may have mentioned 'this month's cleaning', but to do this every month would leave me little room to study for university, so I'd better do it today and keep it up for the rest of the year — what matters is the accumulation of hard work, though the only thing that's accumulating right now is trash. Once Araragi-senpai sees how tidy my room has become, he'll surely apologise.

But he's not even replying to my texts anymore…

To lose the will to clean by myself just because my senior is in a bad mood is ultimately a poorer reflection on myself; well, this situation calls for less brain and more brawn.

Once I make some progress in the morning, take a picture and send him with 'I'm giving it my all today', surely he'll reply back.

This is only the first time I'm being ignored by Araragi-senpai — as I consoled my broken heart, I started preparing to clean

the rubbish dump that is my room. The gloves go on first.

Everything here could get hurt with a bare touch.

Another look around revealed how dire it was.

It's like a monkey came and wrecked the place.

Nothing was moving, but I could hear this onomatopoeic 'gochaa…' sound of messiness in my head. Not being able to see the floor was not a surprise, and nothing that should be upright stood upright. I've had my athletic training in sports clubs so I can handle it, but in this state, fixing this room would normally be beyond the reach of any ordinary girl…

Anyway, I've prepared a hundred seventy-litre bin bags for the occasion, though they'd have to come in much later… first, I needed to sort out these delicately balanced stacks.

Araragi-senpai has always scolded me like someone at the end of their tether; my room may be big, but the amount of stuff I have dwarfs that floor area. I've got way too many things…

Not the actual meaning of the word, but it's literally overbearing.

Funny that I've bought loads of storage boxes for today's clean-up, yet the boxes are precisely the things that are taking up all the space… I'm going to need storage boxes for these storage boxes.

Storage boxes aside, I've got all these cardboard boxes and polystyrene that're just

useless junk… maybe I could move them to the next room over?

A thought like that ignores the fact that the next room over is also full of junk; 'what about the rooms next to that?' I wondered as I wandered over, and discovered the equally sorry sight they were in — the amount of rubbish is making me want to torch the whole lot.

But even though some things look like trash, upon gently inspecting every single piece, thoughts such as 'this is still usable' or 'I really wanted this when I bought it' pop up, and all of a sudden, it'as a lot more necessary. Necessary things becoming unnecessary as they pile up — what kind of logic is this?

And by that logic, how could I hope to finish a section by the end of morning? Not even an entire summer break would be time enough. An unkempt room isn't that big a deal anyway; I can study on campus or in the library, and if I don't have room to sleep, then I'll stay over at Senjougahara-senpai's place — these 'reasons why not cleaning up is fine' started filling my head, taunting me.

After all, it'd be bad if I get injured cleaning up, and I might as well use the time to train for my return to basketball club in university — a rather valid reason for not cleaning, and certainly very tempting, but I held out in the end, because I want to make things right with Araragi-senpai.

Hope, this is.

But I guess you can also call it vindictiveness.

…However, upon thinking about the time limit I've got, there isn't enough time to sort everything into what I need and what I don't; if I don't proceed with the steely determination to throw everything away, that finish line would never be in sight. And the floor, for that matter.

I will have to give up all of my possessions.

Recycling? Giving them away? I'd rather sleep.

Just throw them all away regardless.

Discard discard discard discard.

Discard[100].

A bit of a shame, but whatever.

I'll just buy again when it suits my fancy.

Keeps the money flowing.

There's plenty of stuff that couldn't be bought a second time, though given they were part of the pile in the first place, it probably means I might as well have never had them.

Even so, I still have to sort out the incinerables… but this district is quite lax with this stuff, which I guess is a silver lining… I'm just a bit worried about the environment though.

With that, I gave myself up to giving my things up.

003

No doubt about it, when I'm finally taking on the task of cleaning my room for practically the first time in my life, I am my own worst enemy — nothing's being done. While throwing away everything I come across is a reckless battle my personality's somewhat suited for, I can't help but pause sometimes.

As expected, whenever I discover something that would affect my life if I threw it away, I had to make a hairy decision on the spot; sometimes I find a key I don't know the lock to, sometimes I find what looks like a mechanical part, which, never mind if I need it or not, I cannot even be sure what it's for in the first place, which means I don't know if I can judge whether it goes to the bin. I feel like an archaeologist, sorting out the fossils from the rocks. Those unidentified objects I set aside, which piled up quite rapidly — I think I ended up with more of a mess than when I started.

Without realising, the entire morning had passed. I should have cleared out an entire section by now, but if I sent a picture of *this* to Araragi-senpai, chances are he'd hurry over here out of worriment — though this was technically a way of achieving that goal, it's also the least mature way of going about it.

If I could spare time for lunch, I could at least also spare time to clear out one square centimetre of floor space; with that thought, I

continued focusing on cleaning, but soon I found another object I've never used, but I'm uncertain about throwing away.

No, I've never used it, but I've seen it.

That's —

That seems to be a mummified left hand.

'…Huh?'

It's my most shocking moment so far today.

A mummified left hand? From wrist to palm?

A human's — no, a monkey's left hand. A monkey's paw.

Hey, wait, that's weird.

This couldn't be here.

Because of that devil.

Lord Devil, Numachi Rouka, the Rainy Devil she collected, that mummy should definitely be in that child vampire's stomach —

'Well, well. Leftovers, I see?'

'Waah! You scared me!'

While I was gingerly holding this mummified part — this left hand — a voice came from behind, making me let out a terrible cry, and throwing away that mummified left hand I never had a grip on.

The mummy that was a brief, unexpected 'reunion' once again disappeared into the mountain of trash, which was a big enough problem on its own, but before that, I needed to turn around and deal with this voice first —

'Hey, hold on! That's strange! How are you here, Ougi-kun!?'

‘Ha-ha. Strange of you to say “that’s strange”. I’m always by you, Kanbaru-senpai.’

My questioning was met with Ougi-kun’s usual — usual, right? — nonchalant reply. Oshino Ougi-kun. Even with my animated words, even with that trash mountain in front of him, he looked completely unmoved; one would not expect this from such an androgynous, quiet-looking type.

Come to think of it, this is the first time I’ve seen him in casual clothes…

A pitch-black long-sleeved shirt in the summer break, yet not an air of stuffiness from him. Quite the contrary, it felt cool — chilling, even.

Is this kid wearing black socks too?

‘I’ve popped over because you’ve asked me to. You said you wanted Ougi-kun to help you clean your room no matter what, so here I am.’

‘Is… is that so?’

I did want to clean up this pathetic bedroom of mine alone… but well, I also think there’s no reason Ougi-kun would make such a barefaced lie, so he must be right, I just remembered things wrong.

‘The fault lies squarely on me for not welcoming you. And to be honest, with a room like this, there’s no room for serving you tea, either.’

‘Ha-ha. That’s alright, I am Suruga-senpai’s faithful junior. If anything, this room showed me some of Suruga-senpai’s human side, which is making me like you even more.’

Delivering that sentence with a grin, Ougi-kun is sounding a bit facetious — but now that he's said that, well, I'm not exactly unhappy, I just feel that there's always something eerie, something more to this kid…

He's here to help though. Can't complain much.

'But with so much stuff, this really is a big problem. Bit overstuffed, innit?'

'"Overstuffed" is a bit much, I wish you'd say "overembellished" instead.'

'A superbly neat alternative, but please, it'd be much better if you neatened your room. They say having too many things is a sign of a complex. A lack of self-confidence leading to one building up possessions to fill a void in their heart.'

'Who'd you say has a void in their heart?'

I may have returned with a retort, but this was an impressive accusation — I have to be more wary around this junior.

'Generally, the people who have messy rooms are the people who like having messy rooms — the kind of people who like holding onto their mementoes, who like keeping a complete record of themselves.'

'People who like…'

'To put it another way, by throwing away or tidying up their stuff, it'd hurt them deeply by reflecting how meaningless their lives are — something like that? If one puts in feelings to their possessions, then to deny them meaning and worth would be the same as denying meaning and worth to oneself.'

With him saying that, I feel like I might have that sort of tendency. The type to hoard everything.

Everything — including stress.

Welling them up past the limit — and then, kaboom.

'Well, well, there's no need to think too much of it, it's just some perspective, that's all. Besides, some things are difficult to give up — like this *purikura* album. A collection with your juniors from clubs?'

'It's not a collection. They were begging me to take one with them, and it gradually turned into an album over the years… it's about five hundred yen for a *purikura*; really cheap, so we just took a ton of 'em.'

'Ha-ha. "Really cheap", is that so… I really want to see what'd happen if I told that to a certain someone.'

'A certain someone?'

'Never mind. Anyway, that first chapter that went before was so unbelievably, depressingly gloomy, on a level that required substantial editing just to get it published, so do please excuse lil' ol' me as I try and brighten the mood for everyone.'

After all, I do feel somewhat personally responsible for what happened to her — a strange thing Ougi-kun just said.

'So, without further ado, allow me to do your laundry. It brings me immense honour to wash Suruga-senpai's undergarments.'

'I can't have you doing that, can I?'

'My, my. Not happy about mixing your laundry with mine, I see? Oh, puberty…'

‘Since when are we washing *your* clothes as well? What is this, a sleepover? Get out of here.’

At once, ideally.

No, now’s not the time for that.

‘If you’re here to help, then could you help me find the mummy you made me threw into the depths of the trash pile?’

Indeed, Ougi-kun should already know about my episodes with the mummified monkey from last year and this year, so there’s no need to explain that to him — he knows, right? He did say ‘leftovers’…

I don’t remember telling him about what happened to the mummy in the end, but if he knows, then that means I’ve told him.

That said, realistically I don’t think there can be ‘leftovers’. That vampire has a voracious appetite, after all, and I don’t think she’d miss anything.

Was it me then?

Could it be a large part of a figure that I accidentally thought was a mummy… I don’t remember buying a figure of a mummy, but given my nature, it wouldn’t have been a surprise for me to have bought *anything*.

Or maybe, unpleasant a thought as that may be, it somehow got in before winter cleaning — I didn’t do the cleaning, of course, Araragi-senpai did — before I left them as a ‘snack’ platter?

I really am as thoughtless as I appear if that’s the case.

‘Ha-ha. If it’s not leftover food, then it must be left over from your heart, Suruga-senpai.’

‘From my heart?’

From my heart?

‘So all I’ve got to do is find it? That’s alright, easy peasy. Ha-ha, reminds me of when I did fieldwork in that deserted village.’

A deserted village — even worse than an abandoned town, such was the metaphor chosen by Ougi-kun, as he fearlessly and agilely navigated the unknown depths, no floor to reference, no path to follow, stomping into the abyss without giving a damn.

Not caring if he stepped on something.

I guess these are the guts one needs for cleaning up… meanwhile, even though I know full well I’m throwing them away, I’m still unwilling to step anywhere outside the exposed floor; Ougi-kun really is trusty support after all.

‘Careful, Ougi-kun. There could be something sharp down there.’

‘No worries, I’m sharper.’

He quipped as he shoved away that sofa of mystery (as it made an ominous gnarling crushing sound) and left a trail of destruction in his wake, climbing into the room’s furthest depths.

He may look meek, but he won’t give pause in stomping and pummelling his way through… quite the sharp, hazardous whirlwind of destruction he is.

Such destruction does make throwing things out easier, though as the nephew of the specialist Oshino Meme, fieldwork doesn’t seem his strong suit, as it requires

not disturbing the scene… he probably left the abandoned village in worse shape than when he began.

'Oh, what's this?'

Ougi-kun stopped and made a deliberate noise. I've got a bad feeling about this; it's the same tone he uses when making fun of his seniors.

'What is it, Ougi-kun? If it's just BL novels I don't see the fuss.'

'Speaking of BL novels, they're already there at the entrance. The really raunchy stuff, too. What's with this *Savage Garçon* series? "I'll suck off your bones too, Savage Garçon", what's that supposed to mean? Suck off whatever you want, but that's not what made me stop here.'

With that, Ougi-kun launched a kick, collapsing the mountain beside him — even though it was a mountain of trash, this was a bit too savage.

Unbridled, even.

Which was the same sort of feeling I get from Araragi-senpai cleaning my room; looks like this unconcernedness comes only when clearing out other people's stuff… anyway, it did open up new horizons.

For once, or should I say, once invisible to the corridor, long-obscured by piles of rubbish, I can finally see the fusuma — and.

That mummified left hand had speared through it.

'Aaaah'

'Aaaah'

This warranted more than just an 'aaaah'.

If it was just that trash pile that piled up like sediment, since I was going to throw that away, I don't care if that got stomped or damaged — ultimately the only thing that would change was the sequence — but breaking the room, that's another matter.

With this amount of stuff piled up, I originally expected filthy walls or tatami mats, but I wasn't expecting a broken fusuma…

'Uh-oh, that fusuma with a beautiful Japanese painting got broken, all because you threw that hand away, Suruga-senpai.'

'D-don't pin this all on me. It's all because you spooked me from my back.'

'Now, now, blaming your underclassmen I see? Are you the type who goes "I got spooked by their technique" when someone steals your ball in a basketball match?'

'Uhhh…'

I'm at a loss for words in this conversation, but when I think about it, something's off. By his logic, he seems to have spooked me on purpose… well, that might well be the case.

I say 'might', but this kid really is more of a fright.

One thing's for sure, a long-forgotten fusuma has now resurfaced with a hole in its centre. Surely the monkey's paw that shouldn't be here should be paramount, but the fact that 'I broke part of the house' weighed more heavily on my mind.

Is this what's meant by 'there may be a war going on somewhere in the world, but it's not as important as my cavities'… hmm,

grandpa and grandma may have given up on me cleaning my room, but a broken fusuma would mean a talking-to of unforeseen levels.

This was more than just a child crayoning the walls.

'This fusuma looks really expensive. Could it even be a national treasure or a historical relic? From my evaluation, in the old days this would even be sufficient for dowry.'

'I don't need your evaluatin'. Sigh… what should we do?'

'Anyway, stomachs need filling. I've picked up some fusuma bread on the way here.'

'That's bran bread in English, and stop making it look premeditated with that low-caloric bread of yours. Just get the hand back here for a start.'

'Roger that. I've never defied an order from Suruga-senpai, and I'm not doing that today either.'

Loyal only in action, the junior went boldly for the mummified paw. The mummified paw that had speared through the fusuma was unceremoniously yanked out.

Which made the hole bigger, it seemed. Ah well, nothing I can do about it.

'Oh, hello there, what's this?'

Ougi-kun tilted his head.

Softly tilted his head — frankly, disgusting, but I can see why he did that.

Because.

That monkey's paw that was extracted from the fusuma was tightly gripping something — when I last saw it, the hand was

clearly open, but now it was clutching what looked like a letter from inside the fusuma.

004

脳を混ぜて髪を蓄えろ
Blend the brains, do up the hair
顔を掛いて喉をくくれ
Hang up the face, affix the throat
鼻口を合わせて耳目を集めろ
Combine noses and mouths, assemble eyes and ears
歯を増やして舌を繋げろ
Increase the teeth, fasten the tongue
角を募って爪を積め
Seek out the horns, save up the nails
肉をこねこね骨を束ねろ
Squish the muscles, bunch the skeletons
皮膚を重ねて血管を結べ
Stack the skin, tie up the veins
腕を組んで脚を納めろ
Fit the arms, tidy up the legs
胸を寄せて腹を占めろ
Gather the chest, occupy the abdomen
腰を貯めて角を募れ
Store the hip, seek out the horns
肘を招け膝を呼べ
Bring out the elbows, summon the kneecaps
指紋を採れ声を狩れ
Collect the fingerprints, hunt for the voices
涙を汲め踝を統べろ
Absorb the tears, subjugate the ankles
胃袋をつかめ腸を掘れ
Grab the stomach, dig out the intestines
心臓を縛って肺を揃えろ
Bind the heart, bring the lungs
命を奪って魂を抉れ

Seize it of life, gouge out its soul

005

When you see someone, you don't picture what their organs look like; similarly, I barely ever thought of a fusuma having an 'inside' — for that inside to contain a letter is something I have never imagined.

The letter, the letter the mummified hand grabbed.

It feels kinda like one of those wardrobe-lurking killers or a hatchet-man-under-your-bed kind of horror story — if one were to exaggerate, that fusuma could be a portal to another world, such was the terror.

The mysterious letter, with its cryptic yet powerful prose, wasn't much help.

If I hadn't.

If I hadn't recognised that handwriting — I would've ripped that letter up on the spot, that's how unsettling it was.

'A handwriting you recognise? Ho-ho, that's an interesting way of putting it. Ah, could it be your own hand, Suruga-senpai? A secret poem you wrote in middle school that then slipped into the fusuma via a gap?'

'What secret poetry… who did you think I was?'

A hot-blooded sportsman, I was.

Didn't have time for feelings.

…Besides, if it did come from a middle-schooler, I would be *very* concerned.

'I've never seen a middle-schooler that wasn't a cause for concern.'

A painfully direct statement, if not an ironic one, as Ougi-kun took the problematic

letter away from me — all I have left is the mummified paw.

It really looks like part of a figure now — when compared to the riddle-like letter that came out of nowhere.

'Riddle-like… or maybe the letter itself is a riddle.'

'Hm? What do you mean?'

'Nothing. It's just that the paper looked quite old, and the faded ink also suggests its age… from its condition, I can deduce that this wasn't just written before Suruga-senpai was in high school, it was written before you were born.'

Hmm.

Spoken like a specialist.

About that, though he might be an amateur, I guess as Oshino Meme's nephew, it runs in the family — I just thought the paper was dirty and the handwriting illegible.

Difficult to decipher, and once read, reeked of extraordinary repulsion; honestly, I felt deceived.

Yet — for 'that person', it was also completely in character.

Which was probably something only I'm privy to, beyond Ougi-kun's ken even with his detective abilities… hmm, if it really was from 'that person', such creepy, unsettling poetry wouldn't be out of the ordinary.

For that poem to be picked out by the mummified left hand through the fusuma means it's something special — Ougi-kun may have suggested it 'slipped into the fusuma via a gap', but I hardly agree.

Fusuma don't normally have gaps.

And even if they do, myself aside, Araragi-senpai would've noticed it when he was cleaning my room — on top of that, for a hygiene freak, a fault like that would have hardly escaped him.

'Hm. Then it must've been placed in there deliberately. Sounds like one of those stories where a princess puts a love letter inside a panel to feel like their prince charming is always next to them… I wonder if that's what's going on here?'

'If it were a love letter, it'd be quite romantic… but to think that the room I live in has a sheet of fusuma with what is basically a curse, that scares me a little.'

'What scares me as your junior is to see my esteemed senior living in such a dumpster heap. What if there's an earthquake?'

Faced with such direct concern, I'm left with no words. Talking about my human side one moment, but only now he's speaking his mind. However, it is true. Bibliophiles often say they 'wish to die crushed by a pile of books', but if I were flattened under a tower of BL novels, it'd be awkward for grandpa and grandma mourning me.

'Oh, and Suruga-senpai, it's a "set" of fusuma.'

'"Set"?… I mean, I'm impressed by your trivia, Ougi-kun, but surely "sheet" would suffice?'

'Well, fusuma themselves come in sets, so I would prefer if the traditional terminology is

used. Suruga-senpai said “a sheet of fusuma”, but there could be more than one. Maybe there are letters in all those other fusuma.’

Classifiers aside, he was right on the money — there’s no reason to conclude that this was the only letter.

If they couldn’t be hidden in the shōji… then, including the cabinets, there’s eight fusuma in my room. Though they’re barely visible what with my mountains of trash… that said, even if I can see them, I couldn’t see what’s inside.

And even then, there’s no way I am going to break open every one just to see if there’s a letter in each one… if memory serves me correct, each fusuma looked to have a really classy painting on it and looked very valuable.

An accident’s an accident, but breaking fusuma on purpose? No, never. Besides, that’d be endless.

Regardless of the results, the next logical thought would be to consider the fusuma in all the other rooms. With the Kanbaru household a traditional Japanese one, it’d take forever to go through every single one.

‘Yeah. They’re probably not something you break willy-nilly — it’d be great if we could go about it non-destructively, but I don’t think taking them outside and letting the sun shine through would reveal much. Sorry I couldn’t be of use; it’d be great if I had X-ray vision.’

‘No, well, you don’t have to apologise for that.’

‘Ah, but maybe it’s a latent power of mine that I’m not aware of. Let’s give it a go. Suruga-senpai, you’re wearing a bra with pink and white stripes, right?’

‘No, it’s turquoise today… hey, why do you want to know what underwear your seniors wear?’

Without knowing if this junior was being serious, I responded with wide-eyed bewilderment, which he followed with ‘Ha-ha. Well, we’ll leave what’s in the other fusuma aside for later’, giving a light chuckle.

‘For now, let’s dive into this letter. That way, maybe we could see something — you know who wrote this, right, Suruga-senpai?’

‘……’

Well, it’s not really a secret, and from the way Ougi-kun asked, it seems like he managed to guess it too.

Seriously, how much does this kid know? He even knows what the proper counter noun for a fusuma is. Sometimes I feel like he’s as infinitely knowledgeable as Hanekawa-senpai.

‘I don’t know anything — you’re the one who knows, Suruga-senpai.’

Those abyssal, pitch-black eyes compelled me; even though I didn’t really want to, I replied, as calmly as I could:

‘Kanbaru Tooe — née Gaen. This letter was penned by my mother.’

006

I mentioned it as the maiden name, but I'm not sure if that person even registered with the eldest son of the Kanbaru family.

With everybody opposing their union, especially from the Kanbaru family, my mum and dad eloped and practically exiled themselves to the depths of Kyushu, where they perished in a traffic accident, and their only child — me, that is — was then brought up in the Kanbaru household.

I know of all this virtually only from the Kanbaru side, so when it comes to comprehending this sequence of events, I wouldn't say I'm ready yet. Same goes for the swindler not long ago, I'm still sceptical as to how much of the stuff he said was true.

He's a swindler, after all.

So I try not to say anything about the matter. There is only one thing I can be certain: my mother — that is, Gaen Tooe — was, and is, in death as in life, hated and unforgiven by the Kanbaru household.

'Ha-ha. Well, I would think so too. To seduce the heir, yank him out of a traditional familial system, then to elope together and take him to the grave, I can quite understand their hatred.'

'Seduce', 'elope together', 'take him to the grave', Ougi-kun's bias is slipping; although when he puts it that bluntly, it feels quite cathartic to me. Much better than being all sensitive and avoiding the subject.

‘Hm? Does that mean Suruga-senpai is the heir now? Then if I marry into the Kanbaru household in the future, I would have to shoulder this responsibility too…’

‘No.’

Two letters, a clear and simple denial.

You’re in too deep, Ougi-kun.

Stop it.

‘Hm. But then that’d still be weird. If Suruga-senpai’s mother was the one who wrote the letter, it being in the fusuma aside, it wouldn’t be strange for her letters to be in the Kanbaru house… was what I was about to accept, but with this backstory, your mother should have already been barred from the Kanbaru house altogether.’

‘Barred… don’t say it like it’s the audio commentaries.’

An insider’s retort, as I spun the paw on my hand — the monkey’s paw held by my hand.

This mummy, too, was something left by that person — Gaen Tooe.

To see the mummy like this when it should’ve been thrown away was a surprise to me, but on the other hand, considering this once belonged to Gaen Tooe, it becomes much less of a surprise.

Ougi-kun may appear confused, but a letter of hers appearing in the house she’s barred in isn’t out of place for me at all — same goes for the hand grabbing the letter in the fusuma…

‘Hm… as a boy, I wouldn’t know much about how teenage girls think about their

mothers. But I guess the same can be said for Senjougahara-senpai and Hanekawa-senpai.'

'…Ougi-kun, you mentioned dowry earlier, but before things went completely south, it's still conceivable for my mother to gift the fusuma to the Kanbaru household.'

'I see, I see. That way, the question becomes if the Kanbaru household would even use these… but then again, objects themselves carry no sin.'

I was about to say my mum had no sins either, but it's difficult to tell for sure. Objects may carry no sin only because they are too valuable, and therefore are not worth destroying or discarding, an obstacle when 'cleaning up'.

But now the daughter's broken it…

'If we focus only on "a hidden letter", this looks awfully like Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter"… but that cipher's difficulty reminds me more of "The Gold-Bug", no?'

Spoken like a true fan of his.

I've read my share of books as a high-schooler, but mystery stories are a weak spot of mine, so I had no idea what he was saying… though I have at least heard of the name. I think that was where Japanese mystery author Edogawa Ranpo got his pen name from?

'It's more than the source of a pen name, Poe was the one who established the mystery genre. We have him to thank for today's detective fiction scene.'

'I see…'

No, I don't see it.

Anyway, so Ougi-kun's saying the letter's a cipher? I haven't read it, but "The Gold-Bug" certainly sounds like that kind of story.

Although I haven't a clue why my mother would hide the cipher in a fusuma — then again, I haven't a clue of anything about that person.

'Well, well, it must mean something though. Because that person wouldn't do anything without a reason behind it.'

'Why're you talking about my mother all of a sudden? All I have to do is to make a retort, right?'

'Moving on, should we do some of the stuff written on this letter? It looks more like brown paper now though… Suruga-senpai, trying gathering your chest a bit.'

'Okay, the chest, like this? Wait, that's not right!'

I can't set myself up!

Of all the lines he could've picked, why *that*? — he may look serious, but this junior is full of perverted thoughts.

Then again, juniors take off after their seniors.

'Well, if you don't want to, you can tighten your abdominals instead.'

'What is it with you and girls' abdominals?'

Besides, it's not 'tighten', it's 'occupy'.

And even then, if he asked me to 'blend the brains' or to 'increase the teeth', I'd have no idea where to begin… let alone 'seize it of life, gouge out its soul'.

In the end, I just thought this was a series of frightening sentences… an assorted list of

human body parts, with chilling descriptions…

'No no, it's not an assortment; some bits are missing, no? Even if you somehow manage to collect all the parts, you can't make a human out of 'em. The obvious parts are listed out, but there's plenty missing.'

'Hm, well, something like that I guess…'

Mm?

Parts? Collection? Where have I heard that before…

I lowered my head and looked towards my hand.

The mummy. The mummified left hand. Part of a monkey. A part.

The collector — Numachi Rouka.

'……'

'Oh? Oho? Ohohohoho? Suruga-senpai, what's with the sudden silence? If you think of something, then consult it with me. I love consulting with people.'

'Uh… no, Ougi-kun, you've just, the, that mystery story that you mentioned.'

'Mm hmm. "The Gold-Bug", right?'

'What kind of cipher was there? If it's detective fiction, was it the name of whoever did it?'

'No, that'd be incorrect. "The Gold-Bug" is also an adventure story, so the cipher points to where Captain Kidd hid his treasure. Hm? So your mother hid her possessions and this letter would be the key to where they are? Is that what you're thinking?'

How am I supposed to answer Ougi-kun as that person's daughter? I couldn't know it

then and there — yes, I guess you can call it possessions, or a treasure for that matter.

A legacy from Gaen Tooe.

A legacy, but with no beneficiaries.

Any wish one wanted, limited to three.

If this letter is a cipher that pointed towards the location of the rest of the mummified parts, then…

007

‘Aha. If we’re talking about “The Monkey’s Paw”, it’d be remiss not to talk about Jacobs. Poe was also known as a titan of horror stories, so it might be better to link the two together.’

Even with my theory, Ougi-kun continued without a hint of caution. To establish the mystery genre while being an adventure writer, and to also be a titan of horror fiction… an outstandingly talented man he must’ve been, Edgar Allan Poe.

Then again, this was before the days when genres were codified, so people probably had free rein back then. There’s a lot of turf war going on between sci-fi, fantasy and light novels these days, and it’d probably be quite difficult to be successful in all three.

Any work of fiction can have its own interpretation — a statement that rings quite hollow these days.

Between all that, I do hope there’s only one way to read the cipher. But if my hunch is right, then I can’t say for sure.

I even wish someone would just say ‘no’ to all this contrived thinking, but the ever-loyal Ougi-kun only responded with a ‘Well, the mummified hand did grab it, so it wouldn’t be much of a surprise if this led to the mummy’s location’ in agreement.

Reluctant as I am to say this to my junior, I think I’m being spoiled by him… I need a good dose of self-discipline.

‘With that said, reading it literally doesn’t seem a solution. It’s missing a lot of parts, and mummies don’t have brains or muscles.’

Hm.

Not only a lack of, but also an excess…

But, following this, there are words that call upon the reader to search for something: ‘collect’, ‘store’, ‘absorb’… that much is for certain.

Might that be the crux of the letter…?

‘Let’s do a bit of memory jogging. Suruga-senpai, how much of the mummified monkey did the loli slave vampire end up eating back then?’

‘Lemme see…’

Let’s include the left arm for now… no, that Numachi collected about just over half the parts back then — and then there’s also the head from that swindler.

Some Lord Devil she was, for Numachi to collect all that on her own, but even with this much, it’s nowhere near a full monkey.

The remaining unknown parts remain scattered across the entire country — without responsibility, without caution.

‘Perhaps even now, still granting some poor soul their wish… selfish wishes for their own happiness.’

Ougi-kun said jovially — a rather uncaring response, but as someone who made that selfish wish herself, I’m not qualified to give him a talking to.

With that feeling of shame, I stayed silent.

‘Ah, but now the letter itself is practically meaningless.’

Ougi-kun continued.

Hm? What? Meaningless?

I shot a curious glance at him as he carried on.

'Because, putting aside why this letter was placed inside the fusuma, the age of this letter definitely places it before Suruga-senpai's birth. It's difficult to imagine all the parts still being where they were.'

He's right.

For instance, all the parts Numachi collected over these years means those parts are no longer where they used to be… just as a treasure hunter must bear in mind the risk of 'getting beaten to it'.

Considering the time, this cipher was probably written about twenty years ago; it'd be natural to think the mummy had been lost — Ougi-kun's right, it's inconceivable for all the parts to have remained where they were.

But on the flip side, it's also difficult to imagine all the parts getting lost — the probability of a certain part still being where it was indicated on the cipher is not zero.

'Practically meaningless' is putting it too strongly.

'Dear me. Suruga-senpai, you're not thinking of deciphering the letter and collecting all the mummy parts, are you? I can't agree with that. Didn't you say last time that you wouldn't follow in Numachi-san's footsteps and become a collector yourself?'

'I did say that… not sure if I told you before though.'

Well, if he knows, then that means I've told him.

Ougi-kun continued what appeared to be a lecture to his senior, seemingly seizing on the opportunity.

'Suruga-senpai, don't you have a lot of other stuff to do? Cleaning your room, studying for exams, training for your return in university, those should be what's important. Despite this, despite now being the summer break, you want to go out and collect bugs, no, collect mummies, you're the stupidest.'

'St-stupidest…'

'An absolute cretin — what a fool. I've heard of students tidying their rooms because they didn't want to study for exams and wanted a break from reality, but I've never heard of a student who wanted to go out because they didn't want to tidy their room; besides, that's a whole new level of laziness.'

Ougi-kun went on a further offensive.

I feel a rising urge to punch this junior of mine, but he's right. There's no time for all this. Or for punching juniors, for that matter.

I don't want to become the next Lord Devil like Numachi, and it never crossed my mind to clean up Gaen Tooe's — my mother's mess as her daughter; one mummy is not going to change that.

Of course, it's unforgettable, and it's something I don't want to forget, but I've decided to look towards the future, to treat all this as done and dusted — I won't look

back towards these legacies, these negative legacies.

…It's just that, when it all becomes visible, becomes tangible, I couldn't just look the other way; truthfully, I haven't fully let things go.

'No, no, seriously, is this alright? Just rip it up and throw it away, it's been the source of all your troubles, hasn't it? — it's precisely storing up stuff like this that multiplies your misfortunes, birthing a darkness such as myself.'

'"A darkness such as myself"?'

'Nothing.'

Nothing, it seems.

'Right then, you keep on cleaning your room, you busybody Suruga-senpai. Even as people around the country make their own selfish wishes, even as they get struck down into a well of misfortune they can never hope to claw back up from, they've got nothing to do with you. Even as one person makes a thoughtless wish and endangers everybody around them, you don't need to care about it at all. Maybe you're right in thinking that your precaution would've saved lives, but is it worth pulling off this matricide for justice every time the occasion arises? Such is the situation. It's alright, even if Araragi-senpai looks down on your newfound, self-centred attitude, I'll always be on your side.'

'…Matricide for justice?'

I can't help but show a wry smile.

Matricide.

That word might've accidentally hit the nail on the head.

008

Ah well, now that the cipher's in front of us, it wouldn't do much harm if we tried to read it. With that thought, I set off reading my mother's letter in detail.

It's more likely that I'm the first person reading this letter, but given its miraculous appearance at miraculous timing, it'd be an utter waste if I just tore and threw it away. So let's get cracking.

'Oh, so you're studying it? What a surprise. Compared to someone somewhere wasting away their life because they did this to themselves, cleaning up your room and leading a cushy life seems more a priority, Suruga-senpai.'

Ougi-kun went on obstinately, but who cares — though come to think of it, this miracle wouldn't have happened without him being there.

Without him, I would've completely ignored the mummy and left it at that…

Really good at fanning the flames, this fanboy of mine.

'Then let us quiet down and give it some thought. Mind if I sat?'

'Mm? Oh, I don't mind. Free up some space for yourself.'

'No, I meant if it's alright if I sat on Suruga-senpai's legs.'

'I would mind that very much.'

Ougi-kun replied with an unexpected 'Aw, is that so~', as he dejectedly kicked off things around him and made himself some room.

I did the same. With my hands, not my feet.

'The less stuff, the better of course. The only reason why you didn't notice this letter until now was because your room's in such a mess, Suruga-senpai.'

'Look, even if you have the best cleaners in the room, I don't think the letter in the fusuma would've been found… no, you'd probably be right to call it a complex. I place a lot of importance on feelings; not that good at letting things go.'

'That emphasis on feelings is what made you the only person within Senjougahara-senpai's middle school group of friends still in close contact with her, so it has its ups and downs. I think we should spend more time not on thinking how to throw stuff away, but on thinking how to create more space.'

'To create space… wise words indeed.'

'Yes. A Space Creator.'

'A-and who would that be?'

'Ichirizuka Konomi-san, of course', came the obnoxiously obscure answer, as Ougi-kun sat *seiza* on the exposed tatami mat.

This guy only has his manners to save him…

To be impeccable as long as he doesn't utter a word… in a way, I'm impressed.

While I turned from exasperated to impressed, I sat my legs wherever's convenient — not because I didn't like pins and needles, but because I couldn't find enough room for them.

In the end, ‘wherever’ was not a relaxing stance; my posture looked like a jigsaw piece, a rather advanced stretching position.

‘Now then, there are many ways of deciphering a text, but I’ve no idea which one’s more suitable. What do you think, Suruga-senpai?’

‘Even if you ask me like that…’

Ill-versed in detective fiction, I had nothing much to offer — I didn’t even know there could be all kinds of ways in cracking a code.

Is there a system to all this?

‘Well, we’ve mentioned this before, but this doesn’t look like something you read literally…’

Despite the imperatives, it’s an impossible order — most of the acts, if carried out, would make one a mass murderer.

‘No, but Suruga-senpai, some of these are still practicable. For instance, here, “gather the chest”.’

‘Okay, the chest, like this? Wait, we’ve been through this before!’

‘I can’t believe you fell for it twice… quite the commitment to fanservice. I should’ve asked you to “stack the skin” if I’d known. How pure of heart I am.’

A laid-back response (laid-back, but a hell of a line), as he held the letter in front of his face, gazing at it less than a centimetre from his eyes. He couldn’t read like that, could he? Although he might not be reading at all; could he be examining the material or the impression?

‘Looks like cotton paper to me. Typical for the time. Feels like she just grabbed a sheet lying around and scribbled it down with a ballpoint — no envelope, just a quick fold, and in the fusuma it went; sloppy, if not crude.’

Is what Ougi-kun doing known as ‘profiling’? Well, as far as my mother’s personality goes, he’s not far off with ‘sloppy’ and ‘crude’.

‘But to hide a letter in a fusuma doesn’t seem like a crude act… if anything, it sounds quite delicate, no?’

‘Hmmm, it’s hard to say. As gingerly as she may have put it in, to disassemble and reassemble an age-old fusuma is nothing short of sacrilegious and violent.’

‘Mm, is that so? Well, either way, we’re the ones who broke the fusuma, so I don’t think there’s a point in us talking about being violent.’

‘Come on, Suruga-senpai’s the only one who broke it. Don’t drag me down with you, please.’

Loyal, but not chauvinistic — I mean, I did throw out the monkey’s paw, but take some responsibility for yourself, man.

‘Right, well, let’s not argue over the fusuma, and focus on the cipher.’

With that evasive remark, Ougi-kun finally looked away from the cotton paper to me — I exchanged the monkey’s paw for the letter.

Hmmm.

Now that I’m holding the physical object, the text or cipher aside, the age of the paper

plus the handwriting makes it difficult to read… and I feel like if I treated it roughly, I'd tear it, so I handled it with trepidation.

Let's just go through what we know so far… it lists all sorts of body parts, but doesn't list them all… the imperatives order people to do all sorts of things, but all of them are variations of collecting… right?

Such was my assumption, but from that, there're no signs that this cipher points to where the mummy parts are.

'Suruga-senpai, keep on reading, but listen to this: I've got a theory.'

'Hm? What is it, pray tell?'

'By listing but not listing them all… is this subtraction?'

'Subtraction? Well that's a headache. Sciences aren't my strong suit.'

'If subtraction was a subject, then there wouldn't be subjects at all', Ougi-kun said dryly — well, I do appreciate him lightening up the mood.

'So, what did you mean by subtraction?'

'Eh, in other words, I'm assuming what's important is not what's written, but what's *not* written. For instance, if I list the Chinese zodiac but left 'ox' out, then the assumption wouldn't be the eleven other animals are important; rather, 'ox' would be the important one, right? Something like that.'

Hm. I see, the key lies not in what's written, but what's *not* written, huh — not something I could have thought up on my own, but it could be the case.

‘So, Suruga-senpai, you keep on reading, but would you mind turning your buttocks towards me? I’d like to admire it.’

‘Okay. Towards you, right?’

‘And write my name with them.’

‘Okay, I’ll just write your name with… how am I supposed to do that!?’

What is this, some kind of mating ritual!?

‘This is ridiculous! What kind of level are you operating at, asking your senior to set herself up like that! What do you mean “you keep on reading” anyway?’

‘I mean, you were all compliant the first time round; you’re just asking for a second, aren’t you? Besides, in terms of setting each other up, you’re as guilty of it as I am — well, either way, it seems like it’s got nothing to do with bottoms.’

‘That from making your senior strike a cougar pose? Hey, at least say something more constructive now that you’ve seen my butt.’

‘That sight was so breathtaking I want to construct a viewing platform just for it. That said, the butt is technically part of the hip, I guess. Looking at it from that point of view, maybe you can say the cipher includes all body parts.’

‘Does it now… throwing aside viewing angles for my butt, that’d make thinking about subtraction quite difficult.’

I felt like facepalming.

A prickly jesting junior on one side, a thorny malevolent mother on the other; I couldn’t deal with them both at once — in the

end, I'm not the brightest kid around these parts. I barely got into Naoetsu High School in that entrance exam.

Hanekawa-senpai might be able to solve this in an instant — Senjougahara-senpai, on the other hand, might've not cared at all. 'If you have something to say, say it', she'd say.

As for Araragi-senpai…

'I don't know what Araragi-senpai would've done, but you saying that senpai big-tits would've solved it instantly hurts my pride — I'm taking this as a provocation.'

Ougi-kun said.

Mm.

Which means that Ougi-kun sees Hanekawa-senpai as a rival. I do find him stepping over the line sometimes, so I wanted to lecture him a bit, but to see Hanekawa-senpai as a rival is something I never could've have done, so I kept my mouth shut for a while.'

'I could solve this cipher in an instant too if I put my mind to it, you know. I just thought it'd kill suspense, so I left little crumbs here and there. You do realise there is a shortcut, right?'

'Huh. Well, I'd be grateful if you… took that shortcut?'

I half-asked, doubts running through my mind.

I'll just indulge him for now. Yet even with that thought, I'm still filled with anticipation. Perhaps this mysterious junior knows a solution after all. What tricks does he has up his sleeve today?'

'If you do get it right, I can write your name with my butt.'

'That'd haunt me for life if you followed through, so no thanks. My pride would be plenty satisfied if you said something like "Wow, you're amazing, Ougi-kun!"'

Hmmm.

The humility — and from that, the confidence. My doubts from before certainly subsided. But even then, I'm still a bit worried.

'Then —'

As I thought, Ougi-kun cleared his throat even though he didn't need to, and raised his left hand — itself holding the monkey's paw — towards the ceiling.

'O Monkey's Paw! Aid me, please, in solving this riddle…'

'Wow, you're amazing, Ougi-kun!'

A word of praise from my mouth, a flying fist from my arm.

With the full force of a top-class athlete, I landed an almighty punch on him — lucky for Ougi-kun, the mountain of trash behind him cushioned his landing, so he doesn't look hurt.

I guess *some* good can come from an unkempt room… no, even if he's not injured, I can't be sure if he's fine. It could be something odd — an oddity.

W-well? H-has the wish been accepted? Has the monkey's paw listened or not? He only got halfway there… I hope I managed to cancel it, but…

‘Ow, that hurt. What was that for, Suruga-senpai? I thought I was going to die.’

Complaints came pouring from Ougi-kun’s mouth, but he didn’t seem hurt as he got up — is that a grin on his face? How much of a masochist are you?

‘O-Ougi-kun, d-do you know what you just did?’

‘But of course. I am born of self-awareness. All I did was make a wish from my heart with a convenient magical object that can grant wishes. Now, let’s see what happens…’

‘Self-awareness, more like self-destruction…’

I’ve probably said this many times before, but this junior terrifies me.

I picked up the mummified left hand Ougi-kun dropped when I punched him — no visible changes thus far.

Let me see… according to the specialist, Oshino Meme, this monkey’s paw… the devil’s paw, may be claimed to ‘fulfil any wish’, but in reality, only responds to the negative side of the human’s wish.

Taking the flip side beneath a person’s wish — in other words, a devil whose inside is identical to its outside.

…Though bestowed with this horrifying characteristic, it was also good news.

Never mind insides and outsides, Ougi-kun’s practically hollow. Even though he made his wish, there’s no way the devil would make it come true, right? This junior may say it was from the heart, but it’s hard to say if he has one in the first place…

But then again, this is only what I wanted to be true.

Fantastical uneducated guesses.

A wish made not from malice, but from darkness… it wouldn't surprise me if that paw went ahead.

'A-anyway, how was it? Ougi-kun. Any light bulbs flashing in your head?'

'Sadly, nope, nothing changed. It's all still in the thicket — sorry, in the thickest depths.'

I see — then perhaps that's confirmation that the wish wasn't listened to. But back when I made my wishes, the response wasn't immediate either… I shouldn't reach a conclusion so hastily.

What's dangerous is when one turns off their consciousness, when night falls — when the inner self surfaces.

The inner Oshino Ougi, huh…

'Ha-ha. What a waste of a wish.'

'It could be your life you're wasting… you rock star.'

Whatever should I do?

Should I discuss this incident with Araragi-senpai? I might as well make up with him for good measure, but I still have a shred of dignity to maintain as a junior.

To always look for Araragi-senpai to bail me out means I'll never grow. People cannot save others.

People can only save themselves.

'Ha-ha. My uncle's catchphrase. In that case, I also think that people can only save themselves, so please, Suruga-senpai, leave

someone like me behind and go pursue your own happiness.'

'You've got a really sharp tongue… I can't possibly leave you behind now, can I?'

'Ohh, how nice of you.'

He exhaled as he stretched out both arms.

The body language screamed 'this senior's really falling for it'; instead of 'how nice of you', might it be more accurate to say it was 'how easy of you'?

Now's not the time for word games, though.

Maybe it's true that 'people can only save themselves', but I couldn't just sit and watch my junior walk his path of self-destruction.

Luckily, even if Ougi-kun's meagre wish was listened to, I know how to solve this — this came from the specialists, so it should apply here too.

There's an inside and outside to countering the devil's hand — prove that the wish is impossible, or achieve the wish before the devil does.

In essence, void the contract and render it impossible.

The situation we're in calls for the latter.

Which means, before the devil cracks the cipher, I'll have to crack the cipher with Ougi-kun, so that the devil wouldn't possess Ougi-kun's body.

What was originally supposed to be a light challenge has become something considerably more precarious… I never thought all this would come from just cleaning my room.

Perhaps this was what Araragi felt last year as well. Maybe it's a responsibility every senior takes.

'Mm.'

Ougi made a noise. A thinking noise, it seems.

'Excuse me, Suruga-senpai, mind if I had a look at that?'

With him buried in the trash pile, he pointed with his toe — a stark contrast from his polite language, and definitely *not* the way you should address your senior; I looked towards where he was pointing, and it was the letter I placed on the tatami mat when I was picking up the monkey's paw.

Sheets of paper lie either on their front or back, there's nothing off about it, right? We should've checked it thoroughly.

'Nope. I noticed something now that it's flipped over. Mind passing it over with your foot?'

'Why the foot…?'

That said, there could be some meaning behind that odd request, so I lifted the letter up, being careful not to damage it, placing it between my big and index toes (like a claw machine) and passed it to Ougi-kun.

Ougi-kun also met me with his feet.

What kind of interaction is this?

'Fwoosh~'

There's probably no deeper meaning to this (seems he only wanted to exchange stuff with each other's feet; what kind of fetish is that?). Ougi-kun took the letter into his hands, and started examining it again.

Only this time, on its back.

'Hmm…'

'What's the matter? Is there another message on the back?'

'No, but I was thinking that might be the case, so I had a look, but alas. However, be it cleaning or deciphering, it is important to take physical action. In order to see through the paper from the other side, I flattened it, and found something new on the front. It's in the corner, covered by a wrinkle.'

'A wrinkle?'

I looked at his land, and lo… it wasn't a fold from eons ago, but a wrinkle caused by the mummified left hand grabbing the letter.

Now that the paper's flat, I can also make out the illegible characters… quite careless of me, but in my defence, I didn't want to damage the paper in any way, so I never thought about straightening the sheet at all.

In order to make it easier to inspect from the back, Ougi-kun straightened the paper without caring if it'll get damaged, and thus a new message was found. Taking action is indeed important, it seems.

Although on top of the blurry handwriting and the wrinkle, there was one other reason why we didn't notice this message until now.

Unlike the passage so far, this line was written solely in katakana:

ニゴリナキシカクヲヨメ
ni go ri na ki shi ka ku wo yo me

Read the unmuddied blind spot?

009

‘The only line in katakana, and the only line written away from all the others — looks to be something special indeed. *Shikaku* as in “blind spot”? Or “four-sided”, “qualification”, “assassin”… *yome* as in “to read”? Or “to recite”, “bride”, “night-vision”… “unmuddied” seems to be the only interpretation for *nigorinaki* though.’

Ougi-kun seems pleased for now, having found some hints to go on.

Which, considering how little these discoveries mean for the situation we’re in… well, someone’s easily amused.

But then again, it also speaks to how calm he is.

I jumped ahead and went for ‘read the unmuddied blind spot’, but it is true that every component can be interpreted differently…

But, no matter what, this line is undeniably different — even though it is an imperative like the others, it contains no body parts, and whether *yome* reads as ‘to recite’, ‘bride’, or ‘night vision’, none of them have anything to do with collecting (if it was ‘bride’ or ‘night vision’, it’s not even an imperative).

‘An imperative — alternatively, an interrogative.’

‘An interrogative?’

‘Yes. In any case, I was looking for any other possibilities, but my instinct would also go for “read the unmuddied blind spot” as

you said. That is to say, when you read the unmuddied blind spot, you get the solution.'

An offhand remark, which made me think this was a classic plot device, but what exactly is 'read the unmuddied blind spot'? If it's a blind spot, sure it's to be seen or to be hit?

Even if this was an interrogative, I'm still stumped.

It could even be completely unrelated to the rest of the cipher — plus, it being all in katakana meant I couldn't discern whether it was my mother's handwriting, even as her daughter.

The characters are all too simple, so any quirks are difficult to see.

If not left out.

If the cipher was written with whatever paper she got her hands on, then it wouldn't be strange for her to write something unrelated somewhere else on the sheet…

Well, I say all that, now that something that looked like a hint has appeared, I couldn't just ignore it — having stood up to punch Ougi-kun previously, I consciously sat back down once again.

Ougi-kun also reverted to sitting *seiza*.

In terms of posture, his *seiza* is textbook.

'By blind spot, does that mean "a place that can't be seen"? Were we along the right lines when we assumed the clues lie outside the passage?'

While not deserving a retort, it's something worth saving for later, although this assumption is worth pursuing.

‘Uh huh. Then we need to re-examine things again. Suruga-senpai, buttocks.’

‘No curtness. No curt instructions, either. Don’t just say “buttocks” like a surgeon asking an assistant for a scalpel. I’m not doing it.’

Things are different now. This is after Ougi-kun made that wish on that monkey’s paw — he’s still grinning and completely oblivious, but we are now forced into a situation where solving the cipher is a must.

‘Well, when your mother was writing, she probably didn’t have your arse in mind.’

With some out of left field logic, Ougi-kun ended this lengthy tangent on my buttocks — he’s unreadable, I swear.

Even though he says that, mothers shouldn’t let their daughters be trapped in situations like these, right? But a situation like this is probably beyond the imagination of Gaen Tooe — that person is no prophet.

‘From where I’m sitting, the Gaens all seem to be prophets.’

‘What?’

‘No, no, nothing at all.’

‘Is it really? You sound like you know my mother more than I do…’

‘I don’t know anything — you’re the one who knows, Suruga-senpai. Especially —’

Ougi-kun said while handing back the letter to me. I kept the paw with me this time — it’s too dangerous for him to toy with. Even if he understood the situation we’re in, I can’t say for certain he wouldn’t make some other wish about my butt.

‘— Especially for someone as important as Gaen Tooe, for her to die in a mere traffic accident? It’s so unbelievable it makes you think…’

‘…Uh’, I uttered, but I don’t have anything else to say. As important my mother may be, she’s not an immortal vampire; she could still die from a traffic accident.

That’s that.

Right?

‘Hmm, I wonder… it just doesn’t seem a fitting way to go — well, either way, I do wish to follow in your father’s footsteps in capturing Gaen Tooe’s heart — just as I want Suruga-senpai’s heart in mint condition.’

‘M-mint condition?’

I thought all he wanted was my affection.

It may not be about the mummified monkey’s paw, but what does he have in mind for my body then?

As I once again felt alienated by Ougi-kun, I re-read the cipher on my hand, from top to bottom.

Nigorinakishikaku… [Unmuddied blind-spots…]

‘Unmuddied’, would that be in the sense of ‘clean’ or ‘clear’…? However, something to do with purity would be a far cry from collection-related terms like ‘assemble’, ‘combine’, and ‘gather’.

A contradiction between the riddle’s text and the riddle itself… though given this is a cipher, that contradiction might be the hook itself.

‘Muddy… cloudy. Could it be *nigorizake*?’

Ougi-kun interjected seriously for once.

'Well then, let's have a drink, you and I.'

'Even if you put on a serious face for once, I'm not falling for it. Why do I have to drink with *you* of all people? No booze allowed, you delinquent.'

That said, even if it wasn't *nigorizake*, there should still be plenty of muddy things that aren't blind spots. Being accommodating to the muddy and the clear seems suitable for coping with the supernatural; it's how Araragi-senpai has approached oddities and their phenomena so far.

For instance… isn't there a Japanese phrase that goes 'with unclouded eyes'?

'"Cloudy eyes" is also a phrase. You see, don't the eyeballs of a dead body turn grey and cloudy?'

'……'

A chilling statement from those pitch-black eyes…

You're a cloudy existence.

Couldn't you brighten up a little yourself?

'Remember those experiments in primary school where you made some cloudy white liquid… what's that, actually?'

'Cloudy white… doesn't sound related to me. But, and this isn't about the *nigorizake*, all I can think of when you mention "muddy" or "cloudy" is liquids and semi-liquids.'

'Yes, well, both their kanji [液 and 濁] share the "water" [氵] radical. Although I don't think soaking the letter in water would help us.'

'Mm, I think so too.'

If we had multiple takes, then it might be worth trying, but we can't un-soak the cipher if nothing happens. It could be more soluble than even oblaat.

'…To read the unreadable with unconcealed, unblurred, or unclouded eyes. Or is it asking us to adjust more than our mindsets? If that's the case, I'm too twisted a character to decipher this…'

Ougi-kun said, not disappointedly, but almost with glee in face of this pickle.

Definitely a masochist.

It's just that if that deduction proves to be true, then I can't say I'm free of impurities either — at one point, an oddity, that is, a devil, blended in with my left arm.

'I might've previously interpreted "*nigorinaki*" as "*nigori-naki*", that is, "without cloudiness", but if the correct solution doesn't care for existing vocabulary, then there can be alternatives. "Cloudy weeping", for instance.'

When speaking of 'cloudy' or 'muddy', the first thing that comes to mind is usually along the lines of liquids, but Ougi-kun is approaching it with a pair of fresh eyes. Although it's probably not a phrase at all, tears are a mixture of molecules, so I guess you can call it 'cloudy' in the sense of having impurities.

'And on that front, there's loads of other possibilities. "Clouded cry"… "muddied tree"?'

'"Muddied tree" sounds more like a stutter only a certain lost girl would say.'

‘“Cloudy gas”… “muddy period”. “Blurry mark”…’

The further we went, the more I felt like I was barking up the wrong tree — made-up words should’ve been a great idea, though.

No.

I’m mulling too much over this.

I may be an idiot, but to read this much into a single line is surely the wrong approach.

My mother may have been mysterious, but daughters take off after their mothers, and she’s not the thinking type either — she’s not the type to play the long game, but the type to just do things.

She’s not the type to think about ciphers like this — she’d prefer something simpler, something more direct.

Prefer… that’s it.

It might no longer be a game for us, but it’s still a game for that person — the cipher isn’t a security measure.

Even assuming this is the cipher that would lead us to the mummified parts, the point in time which she left the cipher makes me think that she didn’t want to hide it at all.

A gruesome, macabre cipher seems more a product of morbid curiosity than a dark reflection of inhumanity… there’s nothing to be afraid of once you know there’s no need to take it seriously.

In other words, it’s a cipher written to interest the reader.

Which is still dangerous, of course — one may collect knives and swords ‘because

they're beautiful', but the fact remains that they are still weapons, and they can still be weapons.

With that said… if this cipher is indeed not written to secure, but for a laugh, for amusement, as an improvisation, then viewing it with slightly different, unclouded eyes could prove useful for a solution.

That's right.

Let's solve this like a mother and daughter solving a puzzle together.

Right as I found a new perspective to go on, or at least think I did, a vibrating sound came from Ougi-kun's pocket as an unwelcome splash of cold water.

'Ah, excuse me.'

Ougi-kun said, slickly flinging out his phone with a finger on the phone strap.

'Not a message, but a call. Oh my, it's Araragi-senpai.'

'!'

'Stuff here seems more important, so I'll just hang up on him. If it's really important on his end, he'll give me a text.'

'N-no, pick it up. I don't mind.'

I urged him while pretending to stay calm.

Having long ignored my texts, Araragi-senpai and I are now at an unexpected crossroads, and I am not letting it slide — then again, I can't just ask him to put me on the call.

'If you say so. But I say we don't tell him about the mummy and the cipher?'

'Mm, good point. Even if I'll discuss it with him after I'm done, I still want to solve this by

myself… this might sound trivial in comparison, but it'd be great if you can gauge Araragi-senpai's current mood for me.'

'Understood.'

My inexplicable request was met without question, as Ougi-kun stood up and connected the call.

'Hello, yes, Oshino Ougi speaking. Yeah, just causing trouble at Kanbaru-senpai's place — nooo, that's not the case at all. I wouldn't help her clean her room.'

Not only is he hiding the oddities, he's also hiding the messy room that caused all this in the first place.

Really thoughtful he is, this kid.

'Gathering her chest one moment, turning her butt against me the next, then punching me at full force, ha-ha, what a pervert…'

Oi, blabbermouth!

What if Araragi-senpai does decide to come here!?

'Mm hmm. That thing about Hanekawa-senpai? What's with missy big tits? Yes. Yes —'

Ougi-kun said as he lunged towards the corridor past the trash heap. What, am I not supposed to listen to this conversation? The thing with Hanekawa-senpai? Is that why he didn't want to pick up in the first place?

Either way, Ougi-kun left.

I felt abandoned, even though it's my own room.

So I guess even with a junior as rude as he is, I'll miss him when he's gone… to distract myself from this newfound solitude (and the

possibility of him bad-mouthing me with Araragi-senpai), I turned my gaze back to the cipher, resuming my theorising.

Let's see… the cipher itself, '*nigorinakishikakuwoyome*' was written only in katakana, which I guessed was to make it stand out, and it seems I'm right on that front, but if you wanted a passage to stand out, surely there're other ways of going about it.

Like circling it, for instance, or underlining it; there's tons of ways to do it, actually — why *katakana*?

A reason for writing the riddle in katakana… was it integral? It can create multiple interpretations like 'cloudy weeping' or 'night-vision assassin', but still, *kata*kana…

Hm.

As I reflected on my decent deductions and waited for Ougi-kun to come back and discuss it over, I heard footsteps approaching.

Well, that was quick… I thought he left because he anticipated a lengthy call?

I looked up at the one who entered my mess of a room. It wasn't Ougi-kun.

The person entered the room like it was the most normal thing to do.

Stood in front of me was a teenage girl, donning a loose-fitting jersey, her brown hair heavily damaged, as if self-inflicted — and had a cast on her leg.

010

‘…This isn’t just morbid now, this doesn’t even make sense. Can you just not, mum?’

Though agitated, I retained my composure, and spoke to her as flatly as I could.

‘Besides, I think this is the first time you showed up in the day.’

‘Hmph.’

The brown-haired girl gave a cynical smirk.

The same smirk as the girl in my memories, that middle-school acquaintance, Numachi Rouka, but her tone says she’s someone different. Instead of the devil who’d work her back off to grow, she’s more like the devil who’d plot.

‘You don’t seem shocked at all; what a bore. How’d you figure? Was it friendship? Or was it kinship?’

Neither, really.

I wouldn’t say for sure it’s friendship that Numachi and I shared, let alone kinship being the thing my mother and I shared — the reason why I’m sure she wouldn’t show up here and now was more because I know she no longer has any regrets.

Unlike me.

‘Haunting my dreams not enough for you? Now you’re eating away at my reality? Mum, please. I’m going to have to visit the hospital now.’

‘Relax, Suruga. It hasn’t got to do with your head, and besides, I’m not a ghost. I only

show up when you're in a bind — think of me as a genie of sorts.'

A genie?

How fantastical…

In Numachi's guise, too. I can't take this.

Why? Is it the immorality? I felt strange.

'But I'm not in a bind.'

Well, no, I am, aren't I?

The room's in a mess, Araragi-senpai and I are in a mess, my clingy junior is turning me into a mess, and the cipher's still an unreadable mess.

Exams, rehab… okay, I am in a bind.

If anything, life hasn't gone smoothly at all.

'I've never understood the idea of "living life smoothly". Isn't life all about "not knowing how smoothly things will go"? Risk management, damage control… it's all subtraction.'

Subtraction.

If life is measured only in subtractions, a 'smooth' life appears difficult to conceive.

'Those living life at a hundred percent should be a rarity — hehehe. Mathematics tough for you?'

'Tough… but now that you mention it, I'm not that good at studying in general. Same goes for Japanese… I hate riddles.'

I said, flippantly.

How should I put this, the act I'm putting on is less a rebellious teen giving her mum the cold shoulder, and more a pubescent teen trying to look cool in front of her mum.

'Mum, why leave this cipher for me?'

‘What you really wanted to ask is why I left that mummy for you, isn’t it?’

In a jersey, in the guise of a girl, with a Numachi Rouka-like smile, my mum pulled the mummified hand away from me. Maybe it’s just me, but that paw looks like it’s at home now.

In the hands of the collector, Numachi Rouka.

In the hands of its owner, Gaen Tooe.

The devil’s abode.

‘Or you could at least say that leaving this for you caused you a lot of trouble, no?’

‘I wouldn’t say that…’

The trouble that mummy caused isn’t all my mother’s fault. I’m not that shameless.

Besides — and allow me to say it, despite the misunderstanding it may cause, despite it sounding insensitive and bullish — I only got to meet Araragi-senpai and Senjougahara-senpai through that mummy.

‘But I cannot say in good conscience that you left that for me out of goodwill. And even if that’s the case, I wouldn’t want to collect all the other bits.’

Even if you appeared in as nonsensical a fashion such as this, I don’t plan on it — I said almost in defence, as I read the cipher again.

My mother responded with a grin, a mocking grin — a collector’s grin.

‘You don’t need to carry on the will of “this kid”. My negative legacies aren’t for you to close either — that letter wasn’t meant for you.’

She said.

‘As you’ve noticed, it’s something I gave your father alongside the fusuma. A love letter of sorts, I guess.’

‘Love letter…’

Ougi-kun did mention the story about hiding a love letter in a fusuma… but to gift fusuma *as* a love letter? That’s beyond rich, that’s just ostentatious.

‘It was from my teenage days, so I might have put too much character into it.’

‘…Like a middle schooler showing off the obscurest and hardest kanji they’ve learnt.’

I answered back, with my own attempt at cynicism.

‘As I was saying, teenage years. Can’t help but add a little flair.’

It fell on deaf ears.

‘I wanted to rid myself of the Gaen name, and that onii-chan wanted to rid himself of the Kanbaru name too — that’s probably what brought us together. He used these fusuma I gave him without revealing their origin, probably as a bit of vengeance against home.’

To bring up how my parents met all of a sudden felt indescribable, like overhearing a secret you’re not supposed to know.

Also, she calls father ‘onii-chan’?

I never thought of my mother as the younger sister type.

‘And then we really threw our own families behind.’

‘……’

Throwing away everything until all they had was each other.

Nope, after that — between them, they had me.

'Sadly, onii-chan never wised up to the letter. I was barred from here not long after, so I couldn't get the fusuma back too. That's all there is. A treasure map that didn't serve its purpose, like a story that never blossomed, or a foreshadowing that never paid off.'

My mother said in conclusion.

I only realised just now, she may have appeared as my former rival to mess with me, but maybe the reason why she had to appear as somebody else was because she couldn't appear as herself in the Kanbaru household.

Maybe it's some sort of barrier?

If she had to cross this barrier even if it meant appearing as someone else, that meant she had something to tell me, right?

'…So you *are* telling me to collect the mummified parts after all.'

'Are you still on about that? There's no need for you to do this. Here, I could take responsibility for once and tear this letter up for you. Although you should realise exactly how much danger you're in.'

With that, Gaen Tooe shrugged.

'How much danger? …I know that full well. Ougi-kun made a wish on accident. Seriously, being reckless has its limits — now I have to crack the cipher no matter what.'

It's the same recklessness Araragi-senpai had when he protected me.

‘I’m not talking about that… though I guess that’s also inevitably related. You’re being too naïve around that boy.’

She said without hesitation.

To reckon my understanding of that teenage amalgamation of evil, that incarnation of destruction as naïve — my mother’s probably the only person in the world who could say that. I have a grudging respect for her.

And to call him ‘boy’.

‘That scattered mummy, that mummy littered all over Japan — you have no idea of the misfortune my mummy has caused.’

And to call it ‘my mummy’.

An emphasis on her possession over it, though it also sounded as if Gaen Tooe *was* the mummy.

‘No, Ougi-kun understands that much at least. He’s explained it to me endlessly like some practical joke. Not only will a wish hurt the one who made it, it’ll also put everybody around them in harm’s way —’

‘It’ll be an endless tragedy.’

Gaen Tooe interrupted.

‘For the mummy feeds on wishes and misfortunes — it’ll replicate, like cancer cells do. Though I guess the real thing that’s multiplying are wishes, not cancer cells.’

Gaen Tooe said as she gave a Numachi Rouka-like shrug.

‘R-replicate? Uh…’

Caught aback, the paper fell out of my hand — more than that, I stood up without second thought.

I've never thought of that.

But with that accusation, I'm more surprised I never figured out something so simple myself.

Yes, when I made a wish on the mummy, it responded in kind and 'grew' — an odd thing to happen for something supposedly dead; anyway, what was originally just a mummified paw had 'extended' down the elbow by the time the first wish was done.

With a second wish, it'd probably grow to the shoulder. The third would probably be something more.

'Growth' — 'regenerate'?

Like cancer cells — like an undead vampire?

Erm… what exactly is going to happen?

Mummy parts, scattered all over the place… if it granted a wish to some fool like me somewhere around the world… not only would it hurt them and everyone around… it'd also regrow 'more than thrice'…?

Then the tragedy wouldn't end after three wishes; it'd just spread three times as fast, affecting three times the people?

Three times three makes nine? Nine times nine, eighty-one? Eighty-one times eighty-one… it's already beyond my mathematically-inept comprehension.

In doing so, if a mummy — originally more fragile than that sheet of paper — were to be scattered, misfortune would spread like a pathogen… eh?

Wait, that's weird.

Is that even possible?

I thought with the mummified head from that swindler taken care of, the mummy itself was somewhat taken care of… but now nothing seems to have been taken care of.

It would also explain why that mummified left hand, also originally dealt with, resurfaced in my room — if it'll regenerate and regrow indefinitely, then there'd be no contradiction no matter how many left arms show up.

But why would a recently built-up pile of rubbish have a second mummified left hand I never knew about? The how is still a mystery to me, but at least I know why there's a second.

Even so, this solution is mere kindling for the next problem.

With that logic, even the head can regrow. I've heard that planarians could easily regenerate their brains, let alone oddities.

'Heh heh heh, too much for you? Well, I can offer some reassurance. We've got some trusty specialists on the case, so nothing catastrophic would come to fruition.'

She spoke as if my panicking was entertainment; or at least not how someone responsible for this should.

Specialists… like Oshino Meme or Kaiki Deishuu?

Kaiki Deishuu did have a mummified part… he probably got the head the same way I did, directly from the one responsible, but that doesn't mean it's the only part he has.

Full of untruths, swindlers.

‘But it is true that some parts even the specialists can’t find or recycle. I guess they’re forever lost then — and even if they aren’t, you’re the only one who’s able to find them.’

There’s two ways of reading that.

One is that I can find them because I am Gaen Tooe’s daughter; the other is that I am that fool who would accidentally find them and make a wish.

If it’s the latter, then that’s not reassuring at all. Parts that elude the experts, but not the fools?

Thinking of the worst imaginable outcome is rendering me speechless, but my mother showed no signs of regret even with her daughter like that — I would’ve thought someone so central to these tragedy-causing possessions might have a few suggestions, but then again, it’s not a surprise if there weren’t any.

Dead men tell no tales.

She really has no need for that negative, avoidant, cry-baby of a mummy — so I thought.

‘Oh, that boy of darkness is about to make his return — well then, if you’ll excuse me.’

‘Eh?’

Are you going? — that was what ran through my head. I really am afraid of being alone, aren’t I; even if it’s my hopeless mother, I can’t help but want to depend on them.

‘If I ever met that boy, given my *weltanschauung*, it’d do me no good. I’ll probably get annihilated.’

‘Annihilated?’

She spoke as if Ougi-kun was anti-matter… no, dark-matter?

‘Anyway, you’re not obligated to carry on anybody’s will or legacy, and nobody’s expecting that obligation from you either — that’s all I came here to say. For you aren’t me, nor this girl, and definitely not Araragi-kun. If I may complain a little, you’re always doing stuff using my name as an excuse, and I’m not cool with that. Do stuff out of your own will; if you’re putting in the effort, put it in for yourself.’

‘For myself…’

Just go and do it.

Feels like it’s the first time my mother’s ever encouraged me.

‘Don’t people call you Ganbaru Suruga-chan anyway?’

‘H-how did you know that nickname!?’

I came up with it myself in middle school!

‘Mums know *everything* about their daughters — hehehe. Although I have to say, it’s a bit of a muddied nickname.’

‘Muddied…?’

Some kind of legendary genius she is, if she really sees even putting in effort as something impure — she’s more than a strong character, she’s practically *fierce*.

Which does mean, even if we’re mother and daughter, she and I are two completely different people — yes.

Kanbaru Suruga and Gaen Tooe are two separate people.

Only now did I realise that fact.

Only now did I rediscover that fact.

'Well, muddy or dirty, you do you. But if you're just plain water, that wouldn't sit well with me.'

'Plain… water…'

'If you can't be medicine, be poison. Otherwise you're nothing but water — ah yes. And so, if you ever get to meet him again, tell it to Kaiki-san too. Tell him to not become lost in trying to chase my shadow. There's no need to worry about me, I'm all lovey-dovey with my husband over in that world.'

That's impossible!

I mean, how am I supposed to bring it up with him!?

011

‘Apologies for the wait. I had a long talk with Araragi-senpai — though given the trouble senpai big-tits landed herself in, it’s to be expected. But it does give me a bit of a pickle; for once, in times of need, I guess I’ll have to give them a minimal amount of help… oh, Suruga-senpai, what’s the matter? You look at peace all of a sudden.’

Ougi-kun said while casually spinning his phone in his palm, as I touched my cheeks to see if I looked like it. ‘No, nothing’, came my reply,

‘Had a little bit of daydreaming. Saw a couple faces I hadn’t seen in quite a while.’

‘Huh?’

Ougi responded with a face of incredulity.

Although he’s probably also making sure he had nothing to do with my change of composure.

‘Then let’s continue examining the cipher, Suruga-senpai’, he said.

‘…All’s well with the phone call? What did Araragi-senpai say?’

‘Ah, you don’t need to worry about him. Araragi-senpai’s not as mad as you think. The reason why you couldn’t contact him is because he’s in a spot of bother, as usual. Although this time it’s more Hanekawa-senpai getting into trouble than Araragi-senpai.’

The news that Araragi-senpai’s not as mad as I thought made me want to jump with joy,

but I'm more concerned about 'Hanekawa-senpai getting into trouble'.

Even though she's the sort of person who'd never be bogged down, I cannot ignore that given that it happened overseas.

'No, for the moment, it'd be better not to meddle. We'll just have to wait and see — Araragi-senpai's stuck between a rock and a hard place. Given the situation senpai big-tits is in, helping her would probably end up backfiring.'

'……'

I feel like we're talking on very different scales here.

No, it is of a comparable scale — it does hint at the possibility that the mummy is reproducing itself all across the land.

'Well, anyway, when breasts get too big, they shake and bounce around and get too heavy, which is a pain for the one having them, so that's that.'

Ougi-kun summarised (not even remotely).

'So about the cipher, I was talking with that fool Araragi-senpai, when I thought up of a theory —'

Returning to the topic at hand.

But, with a 'ah, no need for theorising, Ougi-kun', I interrupted him.

'I've got it. I know what it says.'

'Eh?'

That deer in the headlights look from the boy of darkness was worth it — to have caught out this hollow incarnation was certainly no hollow victory for me.

012

I say that, but it's nothing to gloat about. Ougi-kun was thinking about the cipher alongside me until halfway through, and if it weren't for that person dropping blatant hints in that daydream, an idiot like me would never have gotten the solution.

A lot of words may have been exchanged just now, but from her perspective, that cipher was written in jest, and she wouldn't have shown up if it weren't for me taking too long wracking my brains around for answers. That might be the unexpected truth from that daydream.

Yet I was trying to show off my authority as a senior against the constantly-smug Ougi-kun, so I pretended it was all me, as I struck a charismatic pose;

'First I thought of…'

Emphasising that this was all my work.

Which may end up a fool's errand, but Ougi-kun was completely devoted to being the audience, flashing his usual grin — as a mystery fan, he naturally likes playing the detective, but I guess he also doesn't mind playing Watson from time to time.

'Listing some, but not all body parts — you said this was to call attention to the parts that weren't written.'

'Indeed I did, but nothing much came of it.'

'Yes. We concluded by saying that, by interpreting it differently, it can be said to include all body parts, but regarding that, I think it's possible to invert that theory.'

'Invert?'

'In other words, within this list, only one or two sentences are important, with the rest being red herrings — the reason why not all the parts are listed is because there's no need to. As long as there are enough extra sentences, they've served their purpose as distractions.'

It'd be too cumbersome if there were too many, I added, as I inadvertently eyed Ougi-kun's reaction.

'Ah, I see, so that's the one.'

He simply nodded.

So it's still a common cipher…

I thought I had made an original discovery.

'I don't believe it… I've even coined a new phrase for this kind of cipher, like "hiding in plain sight"…' {H}

'That phrase has been there for ages; quite often used in mystery fiction, actually.'

'Seriously? Hmmm, if only there was a phrase that describes how I feel right now…'

'Ah, that'd be "reinventing the wheel".'

So there is one.

Probably the only original thing about this scene is the audience outwitting the detective… I thought pensively as Ougi-kun egged me on.

'But it would be difficult to see which part of the passage actually matters, right?'

A sharp audience, a sharp junior.

'Wouldn't that be revealed in the riddle, "*nigorinakishikakuwoyome*"?'

'Ho ho. Then "*yome*" really is "read" then.'

‘Mm. That’s right. However, for “*nigorinakishikaku*”, that part needs a bit more work.’

‘A bit more work?’

Ougi-kun said as he re-read the sheet.

Having said that, he only skimmed — perhaps because he is now playing the audience, it’d be better not to accidentally discover the truth for now.

‘After re-reading it, I still don’t know which parts of the passage stand out more. But from what Suruga-senpai’s been saying, that’d be a wrong approach, right?’

It always feels like he’s raising the bar… he may be warming me up, but this isn’t a role I’m used to playing, so I do hope he gives me some leeway.

This is different from the anxiety on the courts.

‘Let’s go through this step by step. The fact that this riddle was entirely in katakana caught my attention, and I was thinking while you’re on your call… when it comes to emphasising that line as the riddle, there’s no lack of options; you can even just write “Question” on top and draw a little rectangle around it.’

‘So that’s it, a quadrilateral. Seems like “*shikaku*” doesn’t mean blind spot after all…’

‘Ah, no, that’s not what I’m trying to say. Pure coincidence.’

My examples are a tangly mess.

The only thing I’ve shown off was how bad I was at this… I did want the competent junior to see his senior’s competent side, but

I'd better wrap this up before the façade collapses.

'In other words, Suruga-senpai's saying that something about the cipher renders it necessary to write the riddle in katakana?'

'Mm. I did also think at one point that this may have been coincidence, that somebody else came in and wrote something unrelated.'

'Because katakana's so simple, you couldn't tell for sure if it's your mother's hand?'

'Precisely.'

He really scratches an itch with those remarks — I even think he's known the truth all along, he's just pretending not to out of pity.

'But that is also not the case; the simplicity of katakana is key. The riddle is written in katakana *because* it's so simple.'

'Hmm…? I seem to be a bit slow… what does that mean? So, flipping it on its head, that means to write the riddle in kanji and hiragana would make it too complicated… fair enough, I wouldn't want to write 'muddy' in kanji myself', Ougi-kun said.

'After all, since we've started having all these digital devices, humans don't write as neatly anymore. But still, if the cipher has "ankle" [踝] in kanji, then "muddy" [濁] wouldn't remotely be a challenge. Although just by looking at it, I have no idea how many strokes it has.'

'That's it.'

'What?'

Overexuberance from an overperforming junior is something I, as an underperforming senior, had to latch on with any chance I have.

'We should close in on the number of strokes.'

'Number of strokes… if we're talking "muddy", that'd be sixteen, right?'

Wasn't he saying he didn't get it just a moment ago? — such astounding performance nearly made me respond as an audience would, but fortunately, the number of strokes for 'muddy' didn't matter.

That is not the crux.

'I'm talking about the number of strokes of the katakana.'

'The number of strokes of the katakana…? This, erm, well, I've never thought about that, have I?'

This should be right.

As mentioned, their simplicity means their number of strokes typically get ignored — but if they're characters, they will have a number of strokes; no exceptions.

'Well, they're all one or two, aren't they?'

'Mm, most of them are. But there are katakana with three strokes — and of the forty-six kana there are, two of them require four strokes.'

'Huh… so some of them need four strokes… wait, what?'

Ougi-kun raised his head all of a sudden.

If this is all an act, a fine actor he is. And so I responded, as dramatically as he did,

‘That’s right. Katakana with *four strokes* (四画, *shikaku*).’

013

Technically, there are more than two katakana that require four strokes; if we include the *dakuten*, then there would be plenty. For example, with *dakuon*, カ (*ka*) becomes ガ (*ga*), and ス (*su*) becomes ズ (*zu*), and both go from two strokes to four.

But we don't need to think about that.

Because the '*nigorinakishikaku*' part translates as 'the four stroked characters without *nigoriten*' — with that, *dakuon* and *handakuon* were excluded in the first place.

'Ha-ha. Can't believe I've missed that. With "muddy" being mentioned, all I've been thinking of are liquids and semi-liquids, but I forgot that voicings can be muddy too. Not liquids or semi-liquids, but *dakuon* and *handakuon*, I see…'

'Just as an extra reference, there are no katakana with *handakuon* that also have four strokes.'

'Aah, is that so, throwing in a little bit of trivia for me as well. Colour me impressed. To manage to think of this, quite the imaginative mind you have, Suruga-senpai.'

I don't know how much he meant it, but I'll take his praise. Even though it came from a hint from my mother in the guise of an old rival, it took me a while to unpack it.

Even if she said that 'Ganbaru Suruga' was a 'muddy nickname', to make the connection that 'Ganbaru' comes from muddying 'Kanbaru' still requires work. I may be her daughter, but I'm not psychic.

‘But Suruga-senpai, I understand the kanji/katakana part, but I can’t help but think, so what? Even if we’re reading katakana with four strokes, wouldn’t hiragana also work? They’re also incredibly simple to write.’

Ougi-kun asked, seemingly impatient for an explanation.

‘They may be simple, but hiragana are more complex than katakana. In fact, excluding *dakuon* and *handakuon*, there are four hiragana with four strokes.’

‘Four…’

‘Yes, four. き (*ki*), た (*ta*), な (*na*), ほ (*ho*). But if it’s these four, then the riddle wouldn’t make sense.’

‘I don’t get it. Two or four isn’t exactly within a margin of error, but they’re not that different, either.’

‘But you can’t make any word out of *ki*, *ta*, *na* and *ho*, right? Even if you can, you’d have no idea where to start.’

‘Well, you are right. But if it’s *ki*, *ta*, *na* and *i*, *kitanai* [filthy] describes Suruga-senpai’s room perfectly.’

Harsh words from Ougi-kun, as he continued with a ‘by the way’.

‘By the way, what are the katakana that have four strokes?’

‘ネ (*ne*) and ホ (*ho*).’

‘*Ne* and *ho*? *Neho*? You still can’t piece anything meaningful from those two… there’s no word like that… wait.’

Ougi-kun realised, or at least pretended to finally realise.

Yes.

The riddle did not ask for the katakana in any order. Even so, no word can be constructed out of *ki*, *ta*, *na* and *ho*, but *ne* and *ho* on the other hand…

'*Ho*, *ne*… *hone* (骨) [skeleton].'

Ougi-kun murmured, as he looked down the centre of the sheet.

Yes, within the passage that listed out body parts various, there is a line that mentioned skeletons.

Buried in there, yet hiding in plain sight for all to see.

'"*Bunch the skeletons*".'

Ougi-kun read.

'For the person who wrote it, this is the only line that matters in an otherwise rather long passage — that's why "*nigorinakishikakuwoyome*" was written as a hint. "To read [the katakana] that have four strokes without *dakuten*", which is to say, "read the line with 'skeletons' in it".'

'W-what do you think?'

My confidence faltered immediately, as I asked how Ougi-kun thought. While I was held up as the ace of the basketball club or the star of Naoetsu High School, I seem to be more suited to a sidekick role…

'No objections. In fact, I'd say there's no other explanation. Then I shall officially discard all the other theories I've prepared — looks like I was wrong, Suruga-senpai. You're not as stupid as I thought.'

That last sentence was completely unnecessary, but with him saying that, I'm relieved — but I am slightly interested in what other theories he had. I can't help but suspect that the one he formulated while on the phone was largely the same as what I thought up, only he didn't say it for my sake, but I'll let him sing his praises.

'Ha-ha. I too am relieved that my esteemed senior isn't a fool — then let us move on to the next step. Now that we've sorted out the important sentence from the posers, let's see what that says. "Bunch the skeletons", huh… can't really do that now, can we?'

— Shame it wasn't 'gather the chest', Ougi-kun added with genuine regret, though if that *was* the important sentence, these bad jokes really have to stop.

More than that, there'd be no need for a next step. We would be at the finish line, let alone step two.

'Ougi-kun. By eliminating all the other lines, the "skeletons" here don't have to be associated with biology, right?'

I pointed — at the place where the cipher was originally found.

The fusuma with a hole, exposing its internals.

In normal use, one would not pay any attention to it — but just as humans have organs, fusuma panels also have an inside.

The thing that maintains its thin, rectangular shape.

Its wooden 'skeleton'.

014

At long last, Gaen Tooe's hidden message was completely deciphered, and all's well that ends well — yeah right. The real work came after.

Intense physical labour.

First, we had to make room for disassembling the fusuma, which meant going back to cleaning up the room.

Which was today's plan all along, but freeing up a fusuma plus space to move about is easier said than done. They say 'half a tatami mat awake, one tatami mat asleep' as a reminder that one should not ask for too much in life, but trying to make room for a fusuma sheet is already hard work.

Life is hard work.

We then used some tools to carefully (putting it back together would be for the best) tear down the fusuma, and retrieve the wood inside — next, we lay them out horizontally.

Lay. Or bunch, I should say.

Bunching the skeletons — like a bamboo curtain.

This required different combinations and arrangements, but eventually we pieced together a map — a canvas created from horizontally bunching up the wooden pieces, drawn in by hand.

If viewed individually, all there is are some strange black dots, but join them up and it'll form a picture; realistically it's a 3D jigsaw puzzle. So after we dealt with a jigsaw-like

cipher, we had to deal with a real jigsaw — if this map has a cipher of its own, I'd probably have given up, but fortunately this map looks like a regular map.

The map is of a place not far from here — is this place where the mummy parts were hidden?

Honestly…

I thought hiding a cipher in a fusuma was utterly meaningless, but it turns out the meaning was in the fusuma itself — that cipher would be some instruction manual then.

A 'treasure map' containing two, even three layers of obfuscation; while it felt like going back to square one in the end, anybody else would probably not be able to think of disassembling the fusuma, bunching its skeleton, and confirming what's written on it.

'Ha-ha. It's all over then — right? A nice bit of mental exercise', Ougi-kun said.

By the time I realised, the sun had already set — in the end, it felt like all I did in the afternoon was cracking a cipher. The disassembled fusuma occupied what little space that was freed up, so the room ended up looking messier than when I started; and so another day has passed… frankly, I felt empty over all this wasted time and effort.

'Don't say that, you can always leave it 'til tomorrow. Having a messier room than when you started is a rite of passage for a big clean-up. I'll keep helping you out, so there's no need to be frustrated. At least the cipher's now done; isn't that a good thing?'

'No.'

I shook my head in response to his consolation.

'The tough work is what comes next. Much labour. Physical labour, even.'

'Huh? What do you mean?'

'Because we *have* to head out to the place indicated on the map, right? We'll have to recycle all the parts. What was it that you said? — that mummy had to be dealt with before some careless person uses it carelessly.'

'I did say that… but you also said all we had to do was decipher the letter, so I thought I had to find another way to fan the flames tomorrow.'

So you were planning on that tomorrow? How much of a fanboy are you?

Really, all this junior does is treat others' misfortunes as entertainment.

'Why the change of heart? Did something impact your mind when I was on call with Araragi-senpai? You said you were daydreaming…'

I'm not sure either.

Yes, that person made me realise how severe the whole situation was, and how naïve my understanding was, but if that was it, then it wouldn't matter much.

It's true that the cipher wouldn't have been solved without that daydream, and that person — those two — have also told me not to search for the mummified parts.

No need to carry on Numachi Rouka's wish.

No need to carry on Gaen Tooe's will.

Then this — this is all me.

'What of cleaning your room!? How dare you abandon your abode in such wretchedness!?'

For some reason, Ougi-kun questioned me in a theatrically dramatic manner — he really is seeing all this as mere entertainment.

Ah, I get it.

I've always thought this kid seemed like someone I know… yes, he's like me.

Like last year's Kanbaru Suruga.

'I'm going to apologise to Araragi-senpai, cry, beg for him to make up with me, and ask him to clean up. I've got something else to do. Sort out my emotions. Be it stresses or wishes, I'm sick of letting them pile up.'

'……'

'I've always wanted to be someone like Araragi-senpai — to be as gentle as he is, to be a saviour like him. But that would be in vain. However much I may worship him, I am not Araragi Koyomi. Neither Numachi Rouka, nor Gaen Tooe, and never will I be Senjougahara Hitagi — I have to become myself. If Araragi-senpai's the fool who rushes into battle for someone he could see, for someone he could fondle, then I'm going to be the fool who rushes into battle for people I don't know, for people whose mistakes I could never save.'

With that, I will surpass Araragi Koyomi.

I'll become the Kanbaru Suruga I want to be.

015

The next day, Ougi-kun and I went to the place indicated on the map and went on a spectacular, earth-shattering adventure of epic proportions, finally retrieving those mummified parts after much toil and sweat.

It is a shame, though, that while no unconcerned fool got to it first, there were fewer parts than we thought — out of about fifty kana I'd say we got about two.

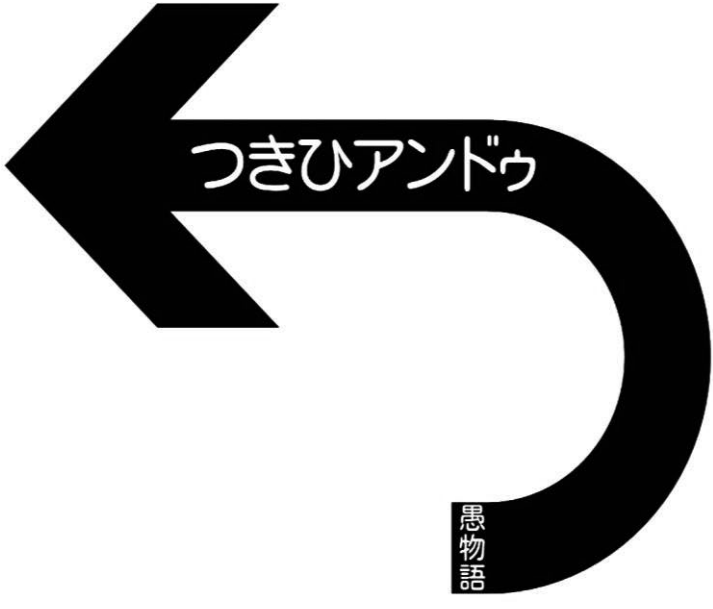
I wouldn't say this was too much work for too little, but even so, it wears me out thinking how long the road ahead is. The thought of giving up did appear, but having thrown such grandiose words around my junior, I guess I have to persist for a while.

Well, that's how things began.

Let this be the beginning of collecting an entire devil, step by step, footprint by footprint — after all, there's still seven fusuma 'unopened' in my room.

This final high school summer break is going to be my longest yet.

No amount of bodies would be enough.



CHAPTER THREE
TSUKIHI UNDO

Note

All names are given family name-first in kana spelling. Most honorifics are preserved.

Japanese is not italicised in general, except in notes.

This translation uses British English.

This translation uses a two-tier note system in addition to a glossary:

Untranslatable concepts and puns that would benefit from some immediate explanation, plus words that appear in the glossary will have notes ordered **numerically** with **square brackets**. (e.g. [2])

Decently-translated puns, references, trivia, in-depth explanations comparing the original Japanese with English etc. that are not necessary to understand the text but are of interest to the reader will be **underlined**.

001

Observational Report on Araragi Tsukihi, the Shide no Tori

No. 2761 Submitted by: Ononoki Yotsugi

In other words, me. It's meee~. Yay, peace peace.

The eternal aberration — the shide no tori — has (as of writing) taken the form of Araragi Tsukihi. Almost half a year has passed since the beginning of my observations. Subject has not transformed or acted in any significant manner.

Subject's appearance has been consistently Araragi Tsukihi; after all, the subject is only Araragi Tsukihi. The most one can say is on her frequently-changing hairstyle, but to extract meaning from this phenomenon would be in vain.

Plus, frankly, her behaviour also seems to suggest meaninglessness. She acts on impulse, her reckless actions a product of her own whimsy, always avoiding work she dislikes. This instinctual nature makes her creature-like, if not an exemplary one.

An oddity.

An aberration, a monster, an immortal.

Yet the subject acts like a creature — *is* a creature.

Such is her; such is her nature. Comprehensible as it may be, it remains unbelievable. One might even be led to think that this kid is an ordinary human being.

Despite this, her level of camouflage is such that even an expert's assistant such as

myself can be fooled. The shide no tori is not to be underestimated.

I now know why Gaen-san let me stay in the Araragi household, even after the business in Kitashirahebi Shrine. Although her orders were to observe Araragi Koyomi and look out for his sister at times, in reality one's priority should be less about the certified harmless Araragi Koyomi, but on minding his younger sister's potential dangers; such is the truth. An inability to perceive this would be my failing as a shikigami.

In retrospect, it can also be concluded that Araragi Tsukihi was the root cause of this town's numerous crises.

Whenever something happens in this town, one can say with certainty that it is related to Araragi Tsukihi — a girl at the centre of the vortex.

Amidst the flames waltzes the shide no tori.

The shide no tori itself harbours no ill will. However, for an immortal oddity to exist near the core, some irregularities are inevitable — and with it, negative effects.

Within his family, the development of Araragi Koyomi's personality — leaving aside his complex towards it — is most obviously affected by his youngest little sister.

This is not a question of good or bad.

This is beyond good and evil.

A far cry from being right or wrong.

For such an existence, a ridiculously ridiculous, non-existent existence, for her to

wave the flag of justice is, from my perspective, quite ludicrous. At times, one has even almost forgotten one's duty, and thought of calling her out with a loud 'Oi, oi!'

If I dare venture in this Compliance Centre report, I would even say I myself am not suited for this job. However, Gaen-san regards this decision and arrangement as one done at the right place, with the right talent. I do not dispute that reasoning of hers.

An undying bird such as the shide no tori should be supervised by an immortal aberration. An oddity camouflaged as a human should be supervised by a man-made, formerly human oddity.

Most importantly, when the subject flaps its fiery wings and threatens to set everything ablaze, one must not cower or show mercy, nor can one fixate or be bedazzled; one must eliminate that shining bird. It takes a fearsome, unconscientious monster such as that to succeed in monitoring an undying bird.

002

Oni no onii-chan (abbr. oni-i-chan) takes good care of me, for he is a lolicon. As I carried out my mission this morning, he sneaked in a cup of ice cream for me like usual. Mm, I'm not complaining. Perhaps the reason behind his kindness is not because I am an oddity who looks like a young girl, but because I am an oddity made from a corpse. But anyway, for me, better a lolicon than a necrophiliac.

Having ice cream as a corpse? If someone were to ask me that, I would answer: yes and no, both. Not that I eat cold foods for preservation, or out of a corpse's instinct. This summer looks to be a scorcher, which worries oni no onii-chan, hence the ice cream, though there are some misconceptions on his part.

If you ask me whether I have an appetite, the answer is probably 'no'.

But it is very important for me, a humanoid oddity, to 'eat and sleep', to 'imitate humans'.

The moment I stop imitating, the moment I lose that human form.

Additionally, sweet foods work wonders for stress relief. Be it stress or relieving stress, it is still 'imitating humans', though with no end in sight for this surveillance job, it might be more necessary to relax a bit. And so I sat on the bed of my subject's, Araragi Tsukihi's room, enjoying my ice cream.

It is also worth mentioning that I moved into the Araragis since this February, when Araragi Tsukihi shared the room with Araragi Karen, one year her elder. However, the two separated when Araragi Karen entered high school on April.

Araragi Tsukihi aside, Araragi Karen's bestial instincts has nearly blown my cover several times (she also seems vaguely onto her sister's true identity). For an undercover agent like me, her independence is something I am very grateful for (although not part of my observational targets, I went to her room out of curiosity. A punching bag dangles in the middle, making her room look like a boxer's — even though she does karate).

Well, Araragi Karen's character does share some aspects with my original owner, onee-chan Kagenui Yozuru; it is no wonder why I would be scared of her. Which is why, since separating on April (also marking the *de facto* dissolution of the Tsuganoki Second Middle School's Fire Sisters), my job has been made much easier.

If it was like then, even if the kind-hearted lolicon gave me ice cream, I would not have had the chance to savour it, or lick the cap.

One day, I'll hop over stateside and enjoy those Häagen-Dazs Cones that have since been retired from Japanese shelves… right as I, a corpse, dreamed such schemes, Araragi Tsukihi returned to her room.

'Ah, aah! I didn't feel like going to school for some reason so I did a U-turn and went

back home and my plush is eating ice cream!?'

Even in shock, Araragi Tsukihi articulated the situation in a clear, simple fashion, though I must add here, she is excessively carefree.

What kind of school life is this, where you skip school just because you don't feel like it? Alas, the fault lies squarely on me as a professional. All my observations up till now have clearly indicated Araragi Tsukihi as exactly that kind of person.

Don't panic. My experiences are not for naught.

I quickly pretended to be a corpse — no, a plush, threw away the ice cream cup, and fell flat on the bed.

You didn't see anything.

If people heard that your plush moved on its own (while eating ice cream), people would probably think you are just a dreamy teenage girl. With hair ties down your partings and shoulder-length hair now, surely you'd know different hairstyles give different impressions?

'No, no, there's no use pretending to be a plush now, you were *totally* moving! And licking the cup, too? Having some fun, are we? You've got ice cream on your cheek, that cup's right next to you, even the spoon's still in your hand. And can you not just throw that ice cream on the bed? My futon's full of ice cream now, geez…'

As she continued pursuing the matter and strode her way towards me, I flatly ignored

Araragi Tsukihi. I am a plush. I do not hear, I do not speak.

Even as she grabbed and shook my shoulders, flipped my foot over, I gave no reaction — no sign of life whatsoever.

'D-did brother pour so much love into this plush that it grew a soul…? Like Pinocchio?'

Araragi Tsukihi said as she patted and slapped my cheeks. For one moment I wanted to pour out my murderous rage, but I kept it down. You could pour some love for once.

Well, my ultimate technique, "unlimited rulebook", does share some similarity with Pinocchio's growing nose.

'O—i, wakey wakey, you're not fooling anybody. How long are you going to keep your act up!? Hiding yourself and living here rent free, you're the worst!'

Says you.

— Was the retort that flashed in my head. Much as I wanted to say it impulsively like oni no onii-chan does, it was a beautiful opportunity I sadly had to take a pass on.

On the other hand, it would be easy to free myself from this situation. All I have to do is use the "unlimited rulebook", whack Araragi Tsukihi's brains out and make my escape — this was something I could do.

I ended up here in the first place precisely because this was something I could do.

This is something the expert Oshino Meme, the swindler Kaiki Deishuu, the violent onmyōji Kagenui Yozuru, and even

their superior Gaen Izuko could not do — only a monster such as myself is capable of it.

Even with their differences in skill, they had their hands tied behind their back by the child-like, sympathetic sincerity of Araragi Koyomi, and could no longer do anything about his sister. This is not a problem for a corpse doll like me, who has severed all emotion and sympathy long ago.

Unlike her half-vampire brother, Araragi Tsukihi has not been certified harmless. Anything suspicious from her will be met with swift, immediate action — such is the assignment given to me.

Ononoki Yotsugi is the tool for this exact task.

Maybe oni no onii-chan is not a lolicon and has noticed this as well, hence the ice cream as some bribe. But for me, those meant nothing.

I am only perplexed by these double meanings.

I do not bring any feelings into my work, and I am not going to be indecisive.

I could kill such beings anytime I want.

…Except now is not 'anytime'.

Things have gone quite badly.

Araragi Tsukihi has 'seen through' my true identity here, meaning I as a pro have not done my job well.

To kill the shide no tori, not out of the job's requirements, but to cover up my own failures, is completely forbidden, especially for pros like myself.

The expert would laugh at me.

The swindler would mock me.

The onmyōji would kill me (even though I am already dead).

And Gaen-san would… (shudders).

Therefore, in this situation, I can only completely pretend to be a plush. It is akin to an animated corpse playing dead; I feel I have lost a bit of my identity either way. Although for such a low-level affair, the "darkness" would probably not bother appearing…

'Mmm…?'

No matter what was done to me (even examining my pupils, though ineffective for me who has the eyes of a dead fish), I remained motionless. Araragi Tsukihi's suspicion eventually turned to confusion, as she placed me back on the bed.

'Mmm? Mmm, mmm, mmm…'

Araragi Tsukihi shook her head as she sullenly left the room. It seems she has not accepted this, but has made up her mind about something…?

Judgements should not be made so hastily, but for now, I let out a sigh of relief — really, this third-year middle schooler is too difficult to read.

Just go to school like a normal kid.

Were I to call her out like that, 'isn't it fun to take U-turns though?' would likely be her reply. It frustrates this corpse to no end.

That phoenix, ever since the Fire Sisters disbanded, has been going about her life solo, with increasing freedom over her own activities, making her ever impossible to predict.

Intelligence must be updated.

Raise her risk assessment.

Though I dodged a bullet this time, I should study better ways of hiding my identity… I started thinking of ideas with my grey brain cells (which might *really* be grey), though one may comment that this is premature.

By 'premature' I do not mean there are no risks to prepare for yet, but that it is premature to assume this crisis has already concluded.

Araragi Tsukihi soon returned to her room. For some reason, she held in her hand a metal mixing bowl — the sort one would use for mixing flour or whisking eggs in.

As I pondered over why she would come back with a bowl, Araragi Tsukihi splashed its contents toward me. Since I was pretending to be a plush, it was a splash I could not dodge from.

Though I should have.

From the scent alone.

From the sticky feeling on my skin.

Unbelievably, this bastard threw me an entire bowl of salad oil.

'Chaka-chaka-light-a-fire~'

An odd tune came from the middle schooler as she took out a matchstick from her uniform. Why she would have matches in her skirt is unthinkable — from the kitchen, maybe, but she took them out like they were always there.

So… this is *very* bad.

This kid is being serious.

As a corpse, I lack any 'senses'. No matter how she beats, kicks, or does things to my pupils, I can exhibit zero reaction.

For a dead being such as myself, once I play dead, nobody can tell the difference. This means I can fool even the experts. A corpse's tsukumogami. But I cannot be burnt.

After all, as a corpse, to be burnt means I would disappear and *actually* go on to the next life. How could someone not in the field know the only way to deal with me so easily?

To confirm if their plush is alive by setting fire to her room… who on earth does that?

Not even aberrations do that.

'Ten, nine, eight, seven…'

The countdown has begun.

On her face, an exaggerated expression.

Maybe it's an excitement towards seeing flames, though would that not be the mind of an arsonist?

In reality, if I were to be lit on fire drenched in salad oil, I would burn so brightly that the entire Araragi house would be reduced to ashes — in a worst-case scenario, maybe even the house next door.

A great fire.

What are you, Hienma Oshichi?

Wrong oddity for the shide no tori, no?

But in my half a year of observation, Araragi Tsukihi cannot be this stupid. The match, the countdown, it is all meant to be psychological. A ploy, a threat, forcing me to 'move', literally.

As easily riled children can be these days, burning one's house down must surely be out

of the equation… thus, to remain still and continue pretending to be a plush must be the correct choice.

It's alright, if this were an ordinary human, it would be impossible to remain calm under such harrowing negotiation tactics, but a human I am not, and even within oddities, none exist with feelings and emotions —

'Six, five…'

Except this inner calm has forced me to realise: at this moment, Araragi Tsukihi is not bluffing; her terror is genuine.

The real deal. *Seriously?*

Surely the kid's not treating this as a religious ceremony, right? This is technically one correct way to deal with a cursed doll… no, it'll be fine.

Even from their end, they must think they saw things wrong, or hoped they saw the wrong thing.

Threats such as these are like some esper in class worried about a wild guess such as 'I knew you were reading my mind!' from a middle schooler. It's the same threat — she *will* snuff out the match once only a second remains.

'Four… guhu, guhuhu'

Wait, what?

But how is the bastard going to snuff it out? Preparing a bowl of salad oil without the water to extinguish it… I bet she's the kind who never reads the safety instructions on fireworks.

Also, what is she laughing at?

What *is* that laugh?

‘Three… ukekeke’

No female main character guffaws like that.

No, there is no way she has considered putting the fire out. Blissfully unaware of the consequences, diving headfirst into this game of chicken.

Hang on, wait a second.

She took a match out from her pocket, but that does not mean it is the only thing in there. A bit of water could extinguish that tiny flame, so maybe she has a small tube, a water reservoir hidden in her uniform?

Yes, that has to be it.

I almost fell for it.

Such is the eternal shide no tori, the brains of the former Fire Sisters, a being of dastardly cunning.

But you picked the wrong opponent, shide no tori.

I, too, have been used for many decades as a corpse’s tsukumogami.

Such human tomfoolery does not work on m—

‘Two… wah, hothothot!’

As I saw through her deception, Araragi Tsukihi threw away the match that, by that point, had started burning her fingers.

The countdown never finished.

As a match is lit, it shortens with time — common sense that seems to have eluded this generation of middle school girls. With that, whether she hid a method to put out the fire in her uniform will remain forever a mystery.

There was no chance to see it in action — the match was thrown in another direction, but oil evaporates and exhibits capillary action. A burning match landing on the carpet would still spell doom.

A small fire would become a big one.

I quickly picked up the spilt ice cream cup on the futon (which still had some ice cream on), and leapt from my position with the bed's springs.

Like netting a dragonfly, I caught the match with the ice cream cup. Just as planned, the half-melted ice cream put a stop to that flame.

Thank goodness it wasn't a cone.

For otherwise it would have been a waste. Once I put out the fire, I finished what was left of the ice cream, together with the matchstick, before landing.

As my skirt flapped gently, I thought I had landed quite gracefully — although because of the oily socks, I slipped and tumbled over right on the spot.

'I… I knew it! The plush moved on its own! I saw it with my own two eyes! What the, it's super scary! Aaaaah!!'

Witnessing my state of disgrace, Araragi Tsukihi let out a blood-curdling scream. All together with me now, ready, set,

No, *you're* scarier.

003

‘Eeh!? So Ononoki-chan’s a magical girl of justice who came from another dimension to fight against magical beings, but the dimensional barrier only allowed souls to pass through, and you still needed a body for combat, and only then did you possess my plush!?’

As I thought, Araragi Tsukihi took every word of my explanation in.

An explanation wrung from pure desperation.

Gaen-san once said to me that I cannot let Araragi Tsukihi or her family (except oni no onii-chan) know of my true identity, that is to say, my identity as a specialist’s assistant. Which means, as long as she is mistaken, then I’m still technically safe, right? Such is my reasoning.

The same kind of contrived reasoning that goes ‘you’re technically not out if you get struck in the head in dodgeball’.

Though if I did claim to be some other monster that I’m not, I might *actually* face the “darkness”’s wrath, which was why I went with a magical girl.

The original idea was to take inspiration from oni no onii-chan’s favourite anime, the *Pretty Cure Series*, which I am otherwise unfamiliar with, so I made up some generic backstory that involves interdimensional travel and possession, which seems to have already captured Araragi Tsukihi’s imagination — the girl who, just moments

ago, saw me as a monster (*I* should be the one who sees you as a monster — but then again, there's nothing wrong with either of us seeing each other as monsters), now looked at me with twinkly-eyed anticipation.

'Magical girl' is already neat, but topping it off with 'of justice' has sealed the deal — even in a post-Fire Sisters era, her sense of justice still burns strong.

Even though she's the one causing all the trouble. And some trouble that is.

'A-and then? What are the magical creatures you defeat like?'

'Er, um… well, it can't be summed up in one word.'

My imagination has not gone this far yet.

Sorry to disappoint, but my creativity is insufficient for responding to your expectant queries.

'That's alright, if you can't sum it up in one, I'll give you a hundred! Tsukihi-chan will listen to someone seriously for the first time in her life!'

So you have never taken anyone seriously… how did you manage to make it through these fifteen years? This kid's family might be more to blame here…

'…It's a creature who attracts evil without themselves noticing. That creature pulls in disasters like a magnet. I must stop them before disaster envelops this town.'

'Aah — that's really evil —'

I have actually modelled it after this third-year middle schooler in front of me, but I will keep that to myself. She seems impressed.

So, it appears the crisis has finally passed. It is time to wrap this up. If I get myself stuck in exposition, it would be tricky. Foreshadowing and pay-off is oni no onii-chan's specialty.

'Well, I'll have to head towards battle now. Worry not, once I am done my soul will automatically return to my home dimension. This body — no, this doll will revert to its original state and be back in your room.'

I cannot abandon my assignment, so I rounded things off like this for now. Phew, though this was unexpected, at least I have avoided the worst possible outcome.

I say that, but now is not the time to relax. I need to maintain my aura of seriousness and leap out from the window. I wanted to let Araragi Tsukihi witness me fly out as a magical girl (when I say 'fly', I mean a simple jump). Consider it a little something for the fans.

'So pray for my victory. For this world, and for your loved ones.'

I think this is what one says when bidding farewell? I continued acting the warrior magical girl, as I bent my knees.

'Unlimited —'

'Now hol'n a sec!'

Just as I was about to summon my technique, she interrupted with a strange tone and went for my kneecaps.

Is this kid for real?

Even without knowing what the "unlimited rulebook" is, to attack someone in the kneecaps just as they are about to fly…

any bit of thought would reveal how dangerous this was, surely?

Fortunately, she did so right before my body was about to expand, so everything was fine. One small misstep, however, and the entire upper floor of the Araragi house could have been wiped out.

'W-what is it, Tsukihi-kun?'

So generic was the warrior magical girl setting, I completely changed my tone of voice. Not that my character was specific in the first place, though it did acquire some quirks over time, and now, paired with a middle school girl in her room, I think it contrasts nicely.

'Hu-hu-hu, did you think I would do nothing after hearing all that?'

Yes, do nothing, *please*.

The anger seems to have eluded her, perhaps due to my lack of intonation as a corpse, as a doll. If anything, Araragi Tsukihi lightly rapped her chest, and gave me a smug look.

'How could I sit still in face of such a terrifying creature! We'll defeat it! I'll help!'

'Eh…?'

'Let's do this together!'

'Eh? Ehh…?'

What's going on?

Are we seriously continuing this?

I thought this was a short story?

There is no need for this, just talk about some book we like and finish it off like usual.

'…Nay, a humble servant such as myself dare not inconvenience the common folk residing in this world.'

This unexpected development caused some mild panic, which in turn made me sound less like an otherworldly magical girl, and more like a drifting samurai. Not that Araragi Tsukihi minded at all.

It seems she still has not taken any person seriously ever — which is fair play; I am no human, I am an aberration.

Wait, no, I am a magical girl of justice.

'It's something I have to face on my own, so —'

'None of this "on your own" business! This is my world, and I'm protecting it! To even say it'll be inconvenient, that's impossible!'

Maybe I am reading too much into it, but from a certain viewpoint, it sounded like she was declaring ownership over the entire world.

'Consider it fate that it was *my* doll you possessed; so, no worries, Ononoki-chan! It's too late for you to stop me anyway, I'm rearing to go! Even if you say no, I will cling onto you like a persistent salesperson!

'I'll have you know, this world has its warriors of justice too!'

Araragi Tsukihi said, as if waiting to say this line the whole time.

'For I am justice herself! Heh-heh-heh!'

You're *not* justice.

You're a disaster.

To this world, and to me — was what I wanted to say, but I held it in, and gave it

some thought. As a professional, as a new member of the Araragi family, and as a rookie magical girl.

Right then, you look ready, Araragi Tsukihi. Let us see what you are made of — I guess even your brother would not know the answer to that.

004

Whether oni no onii-chan could be considered Araragi Tsukihi's real brother is something not even the experts can agree on, but if this situation were to continue, I would probably be sentenced (which is what I originally meant), so I shall have to lie even further just to make it out of here alive.

I may have said that I am not careless, but I probably really am — me covered in salad oil does not help; I have really let go. I thought with a title like *Orokamonogatari* ('*Fool's Tale*') that it would be a light comedy along the lines of 'slightly silly girls frolicking about!', but we ended up with some properly problematic girls from start to finish.

It might be too late for saying this, but oni no onii-chan did a really great job under such environments. However, every cloud has a silver lining; I've got an idea. Speaking of problematic girls, there remains one around Araragi Tsukihi who has yet to make an appearance.

I shall ask for her assistance.

'So if you don't want to be killed, then help me out, Sengoku Nadeko.'

'H-hyehhh!?'

It took me one minute to go from Araragi Tsukihi's room in the Araragi household to Sengoku Nadeko's room in the Sengoku household (they live close to each other).

The magical girl of justice made her entrance via the window, carelessly left open. Sengoku Nadeko, scribbling at her desk,

tumbled over backwards with her chair, her feet now facing the ceiling.

Everything from her feels like an act…

However, unlike before, Sengoku Nadeko now wore short hair and had jeans for pyjamas, making that fall less lovable than it was — something she would probably be happy to know.

Upon closer inspection, she was not writing, but drawing. A sheaf of manga genkō yōshi lay on her desk.

Oh yeah.

She wanted to be a manga artist.

I cannot tell if it is any good from a single page, but how should I put it, it's all girly-girly, very shoujo… honestly, not my cup of tea.

After that, Araragi Tsukihi set off for school once again — but not before much nagging from me. After all, the battle would not happen until nightfall, and isn't it more in-character for a warrior of justice to attend school — was the logic behind my persuasion, which she surprisingly accepted on the spot. She replied, 'okay, then I'll see you after school!' and made her way, a spring in her step.

Whilst not a solution to anything, at least she is no longer with me, which is a great relief — communication with this girl is legitimately draining.

But now that I am thinking of possible endings, the most ideal one would be me insisting 'oh, the creature showed up without warning while you were in school, and I

defeated it', return to being a doll, and turn everything back to normal. But she will not accept that.

I know she wouldn't.

She cares not about justice at this point. All she wants is to see 'a doll battling a creature', an anime-esque, unreal scene like that. Fantasy does seem to have made a comeback in recent years, although I was not expecting such praise for my story out of thin air.

If she realised *she* was the unreal existence, how would she even react? — keeping that a secret is also part of my duties.

Therefore, for things to end 'without her knowing' would probably be unacceptable for Araragi Tsukihi — that'd be no good.

An accidental foreshadowing should be paid off — if without her participation, at least with her witnessing it, otherwise she would not let go. Therefore, I have to defeat the creature as a magical girl of justice.

…Why are 'magical' girls the ones who defeat 'magical' creatures anyway? Isn't this fratricide? I mulled over the contradictions in my backstory, though it is something I can no longer back-track on. Someone must play the 'magical creature' now.

The first thing I had in mind for the role was the former Kissshot — the Aberration Slayer, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade. Currently known as Oshino Shinobu.

The girl with the golden hair.

Who might not look a monster herself, but she could probably materialise one with her powers, as a temporary prop.

The problem is, she and I have a lot of history, although that vampire's personality is not all that vile. If I put on a friendly face, she might still grant her rival's request, but all this is simply my own conjecture.

Which is a path I abandoned soon after. The vampire aside, if word got to her cohabitant, oni no onii-chan, then that would spell great misery.

If that lolicon-plus-siscon did some digging and found out I was there to monitor his sister, that would be bad. He would defend his sister as a siscon, and abuse me as a lolicon.

And along the same lines, I have to rule out not only the former Kissshot, but everyone around oni no onii-chan's network. I thought about letting her shadow my work as a specialist, then lie and claim that I am getting rid of those magical creatures; but with a new goddess installed in this town, it has become extraordinarily peaceful, without any extraordinary aberrations showing up. No longer extraordinary, but ordinary.

This amount of quiet means that Araragi Tsukihi is almost certainly the only concern in this town.

Which also means no magical creatures.

I have also thought of putting on a solo act — say there is a monster that cannot be seen by idiots, and put on a show for her. But then

I thought of the perfect candidate — Sengoku Nadeko.

Araragi Tsukihi's childhood playmate, who was once bitten by a snake and got coiled up — in other words, had experience with aberrations, to put it briefly.

She is also one of the very few girls whom Araragi Koyomi has cut off. That makes her the best possible guest star in this production.

Having decided upon this, I visited the Sengoku household, this time with a proper "unlimited rulebook".

It should be noted that Sengoku Nadeko is the same age as Araragi Tsukihi; in other words, she is also a third-year middle schooler, except she never goes to school now (a fact I noticed as part of observing Araragi Tsukihi), so it is no surprise that she's inside her room all the time.

It does seem, however, that a magical girl of justice flying in through her window is something beyond her expectations. As she tumbled over with her chair in front of an intruder, she seems a messy state.

But ultimately, she is immune to such aberrations, or should I say, resistant to them.

'N-no, you're *definitely* not some magical girl, right? You're some oddity, aren't you?'

Even gripped with fear, she made a verbal comeback.

'A-an oil monster?'

Nm.

It is already dry at this point, so I went without changing my clothes, but it seems the scent of salad oil remained… it may be more accurate to say it has soaked through than to say it has dried.

'Y-you did say you were "of justice"… so someone to do with Tsukihi-chan?'

She is surprisingly perceptive.

Though from her perspective, to happen upon a sudden disaster of unknown origin leaves little candidates for explanation, save for her unscrupulous childhood playmate.

I say candidates, it feels more like an arrest for her ('candidate' (候補) and 'arrest' (逮捕) have similar-looking kanji, I mentioned it as mere wordplay).

Though their relationship went on pause for a while, at least Araragi Tsukihi was no blank slate for her since primary school — which saves a lot of explanation for me, thank god.

When push comes to shove, I could still coerce her to help me out, but it seems we share some common ground on Araragi Tsukihi, and under the principle of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend', we could co-operate at least temporarily.

I wish it were that simple.

'Ahh, that sounds like Tsukihi-chan.'

Sengoku Nadeko nodded, unfazed at my explanation.

Oh? How unreactive.

A difference in temperature.

A disagreement over how big the problem is.

Perhaps I have numbed her senses through that magnificent entrance.

Of course, I did not tell her everything straight away — what she does not know about the shide no tori, I kept it from her. It is the mark of a pro.

Confidentiality.

I maintained that I sneaked into the Araragi house to monitor Araragi Koyomi and Oshino Shinobu, though I needed her help because Araragi Tsukihi might be about to see through my 'act'.

She became pensive at the mention of the two vampires, but the damage seemed less severe than I thought (which meant my plan to weaken her and gain the psychological high ground had failed).

Seems like she has let go of it more than I thought?

If so, it could be thanks to Araragi Tsukihi. After Sengoku Nadeko returned from the mountains, Araragi Tsukihi visited her place often.

So frequent were her visits, I even spotted a cushion just for her — how unabashed.

'Alright, understood. I'll help.'

Originally expecting this incongruity in awareness to be a big hurdle in our exchange, Sengoku Nadeko responded with an unexpectedly crisp agreement.

To that end, speaking of why I ended up in the Araragi household, Sengoku Nadeko eviscerating oni no onii-chan over and over at the mountaintop was another distant cause. Originally wanting to pursue this as

part of negotiating with her, I felt a bit let down by this wasted opportunity.

But maybe some of it came through (though as a corpse, it would not have been via my face), because Sengoku Nadeko followed with:

'In the end, it's for Tsukihi-chan too.'

Aw, how cute.

This unwitting cuteness was also where her complex first arose, and subsequently, everything that happened last year, but seeing her like this, I cannot blame her. After all, one's eyes gradually gravitate towards her appearance, drowning out what she is saying.

No amount of words could rival 'cute'.

As a monster, I could separate 'cute' from all other sorts of impressions, though humans would probably lump them all together — ultimately, no one was able to see this girl for who she is.

Even now, when she says it's for Tsukihi-chan, who knows what she is actually thinking — she isn't seeing this as material for her manga, right?

Well, I do hope she does not lose her tenacity as a human. At least compared to when she was stripped of everything but 'cute', she is on good track.

A good track, from where I'm looking.

Though similarly 'a human turned oddity', the process was irreversible for me, so I cannot help but express support for survivors like Araragi Koyomi or Sengoku Nadeko.

But I will still kill if the situation calls for it.

The same goes for Sengoku Nadeko; though she is not a subject of surveillance, she is someone to be alert around, so it would be advisable if I checked in on her 'from time to time' alongside my current duties.

'But I, what can I do? I'm, no longer, a serpent god… — Tsukihi-chan, what can I do to help her?'

What can I do to help her.

If Oshino no onii-chan heard such selflessness, I wonder what he would say… seems like she's let go of those fangs.

Not her own, but the serpent's.

That said, however brief, her experience being a goddess helped her accept my request with such frictionless ease. Seems in this world, 'happiness' means different things to different people.

'Oh, and I — I haven't been outside much. If I'm in the sun for too long, I'll probably faint…'

The spirit is willing, but the flesh is a bit *too* weak…

It appears she has essentially become a hikikomori. Although my primary observational target is Araragi Tsukihi, leaving me little room to see how world-weary Sengoku Nadeko is, in a way, it's quite worrying; is she doing alright?

'…Anyway, isn't it about time you headed to school? Don't worry, nobody is going to mind you.'

Against my typical nature, I suggested this for her (a human's) sake, but it seems I went

too far. I should not say things beyond my comfort zone.

'Mm. The class too, they seem to be getting along now. I've heard it from Tsukihi-chan.'

Sengoku Nadeko replied with a semi-answer — though I did not know that a girl like Araragi Tsukihi would conduct an investigation like that. Finding out how other schools are doing internally seems a challenging task…

'But, well… I've, now, got something that needs doing. For me, it's even necessary, I think.'

Sengoku Nadeko spoke as she finally got up. She righted that fallen chair, and put her hand on her desk — the desk with the manga genkō yōshi.

By 'something that needs doing', did she mean drawing manga?

Hmm.

Is it so important that she has to take leave from school? I can't help but think that if this continues, this girl would probably never make it to high school — but then again, if I told her to stop, she would take it on as just 'someone else's advice', born from logic and rationality.

Speaking of, maybe it's because I was still on the ground, but when Sengoku Nadeko stood up, I can't help but think 'Eh?'

Has she grown taller?

To put it in manga terms, the background just clashes with the perspective… when she was a god in that shrine, she felt a bit, erm, smaller, tinier… ah, that's it.

Puberty, isn't it?

Her being alive means she grows.

I see.

But it does feel quite abrupt. Maybe it is a result of discarding those shackles known as her 'cuteness', finally enabling her body to grow — I analysed coldly.

Araragi Karen aside, she might end up taller than oni no onii-chan someday.

If being a hikikomori means Sengoku Nadeko's healthy growth, it would be plenty ironic… then I guess there's no reason to force herself to school.

I never went, but from what I have heard, there are not many other places with that high a stress level.

Yet despite this, everything looks very orderly and neatly divided; oh yeah, it's a lot like those.

Like the battery cages you get for chickens.

No wonder they produce freaks — there is no need to force oneself to go there and leave bad memories.

'Obviously, to help Tsukihi-chan is something I want to do too. So, what should I do?'

'Ahh, mm… yes, I do remember, you no longer have the serpent god inside you.'

I spoke my mind.

This kid is considerably limited in her intellectual faculties, so I have to make it as clear and simple as I can for her.

'But don't you still have other oddities living in you?'

'? …Really?'

Sengoku Nadeko tilted her head in bewilderment.

Did she forget? No, did she not realise?

In that case, Kaiki no onii-chan has done a superb job — as expected of a swindler.

'The slug.'

'Eh?'

'Slug Tofu — the aberration Kaiki Deishuu put on you to remove the serpent god. I'm going to go ahead and do a little recycling.'

005

Technically, the *main portion* (as it were) of the Slug Tofu had left Sengoku Nadeko a long time ago — it is not a particularly strong or persistent aberration.

In order to give a her a smooth, uninterrupted life, the swindler had given the middle schooler some palliative care, inserting a fake aberration into her, the oddity itself a very vague one.

When Sengoku Nadeko returned from the mountains, the oddity would have been almost completely detoxed by the time she left hospital — but, there will still be scraps left.

Scraps.

To put it more literally — an afterimage.

The same as when the swindler planted the Cinderswarm Bee onto Araragi Karen; it still resides within her memory and spirit, a natural aftereffect.

Having said that, it was also possible to seek help from Araragi Karen, but given that she is stuck between an immortal brother and an immortal sister, trying to live as a normal human being… she already has enough on her plate, so I decided to leave her be.

In the hopes of having her continue this miracle of miracles.

Besides, even if Araragi Tsukihi narrowly missed my true identity, I am not risking it again with Araragi Karen — who knows what

would happen to this undercover investigation.

It will be Sengoku Nadeko who helps me return things to normal.

'To experience being an oddity… no, to rehabilitate from being a goddess, made its use necessary, but you have no need for it now, don't you? You can give me that afterimage. I'll pretend it's a monster and deal with it in front of Araragi Tsukihi. It fits the role perfectly.'

The Slug Tofu is no immortal aberration, and therefore falls outside of my expertise. But given that it is scraps, I could handle it either way. Not to sound all greedy, but clean-ups such as this would cost you if done by a specialist, though I am cleaning up after Kaiki no onii-chan, so I guess it is some coincidence.

To wit, the bee's stinger planted on Araragi Karen might have to be cleaned up by me some day. I've only thought about this just now, but given her situation, that stinger might have helped her from experiencing oddity-related anaphylactic shock. If you look at it that way, then it might be better if I didn't do anything…

'O-okay… I — I see. Kaiki-san has…'

Sengoku Nadeko's expression became complex.

Scraps may be scraps, but for someone to have bits of oddities still inside them, I expected a more uncomfortable reaction, but that does not seem to be the case.

'Kaiki-san, has he been doing well?'

She asked that out of line question.

I say out of line, she might have asked it to get it out of mind.

So she really has let go of her fangs.

How much does she know that it was the swindler's deception? Then again, she might have fell for it willingly, despite knowing everything; such an attitude cannot be discounted.

'He's doing fine', I lied.

I have never seen that sickly, ill-fated man doing fine — the most I can say is he's doing richly.

'So how do we… take it out? For something like this… I remember we had to do some ceremony? All I need to do is change into a school swimsuit?'

I have no idea where that misunderstanding came from, but from Sengoku Nadeko's response, I can tell she has had at least a bit of experience. Come to think of it, to endure two exorcisms within half a year, this kid has had a rough life.

'We can skip that… there's not much time left.'

'S-skip it?'

'One thing that separates me from Oshino no onii-chan is our attention to detail. I'm less strict about things. More of an ends-justify-means type of person…'

Such a forceful approach came from another specialist, the violent onmyōji Kagenui Yozuru, but there is no time for details. If I did leak out the part where onee-chan and I are experts in dealing with

immortal aberrations, that'd be another rabbit hole.

It is incredible that Sengoku Nadeko sees Araragi Tsukihi as a valued friend. If she knows that I in fact sneaked into the Araragis in order to kill Araragi Tsukihi if necessary, it would be a source of great friction.

So I kept my mouth shut, stood next to Sengoku Nadeko, and took out a single sheet of plain genkō yōshi from the shelf onto her desk.

'I say that, but we should do the bare minimum… could you draw on this?'

'Mm? Draw…'

'You're good at drawing, right? Then please draw a slug here. It's all slippery and slimy, so it's really simple, no?'

'N-no, isn't that difficult? Because it's slippery and slimy?'

My request has been met with reluctance from Sengoku Nadeko — seems primitive organisms prove to be the hardest to draw.

'And, besides, why am I drawing a manga with a slug as the main character? It's too novel a concept…'

'There's no need to draw a manga. You can think of it as character design.'

'Character design…'

'If you can't draw it, then I can do it, but it would be more effective if it was the person afflicted who drew it. After a certain process, what's left of the Slug Tofu would transfer from your body to this genkō yōshi sheet.'

'…Like how the snake god aberration was sealed inside a talisman?'

‘Something… like that.’

It is in fact completely different, but for an outsider’s understanding, I’ll give her a pass. That god’s source and origin are partially taboos, so explaining it would get complicated quickly.

‘Understood. Then, Ononoki-chan, wait here. I’ll draw it.’

Once she said that, she sat on her chair, and picked up her pencil — is she sketching this from scratch? Quality is not that big of a concern, to be honest; a couple lines, that’ll do…

Then again, for a creator, ‘that’ll do’ is probably something prohibitively inconceivable. With that thought, I stood next to her as she finished her drawing.

It’s not a bad thing to be invested… I say that, but watching someone else’s creative process and waiting gets boring really fast.

The silence is embarrassing too.

This kid has matured a lot since then (not on the outside, but inside), she wouldn’t be secretly mocking me for making a mistake in my work, right? — these paranoid thoughts started entering my mind. If she gets the impression that I would cover up my mistakes by enlisting a layperson, then that’s simply too bad.

I am a professional, conducting a foolproof plan for keeping a secret — well, there’s no point in reading too much into this girl, that I do know very well.

In order to stop overthinking, I decided to ask some questions I am not personally interested in.

'You use a spoon nib pen and pretend to look the part, but have you submitted your work to a publisher or a competition? I've heard for those who debuted early, they would have their own editor by their teens.'

'Hm? Ahh, well, this, you can make it even with a sign pen. Even among the pros, you'd hear quite a number of them go "how long are we still going to be stuck with something as ancient as ink" or something like that.'

She replied with a non-answer.

So concentrated was she, that she may not be listening in the first place — turns out Araragi Tsukihi is not the only middle schooler who does not listen to people.

'If it's digital, then, it's not that big a deal… but, the search for better gear would add to that initial investment… um, what were you asking?'

'Whether you've submitted your work. Though recently, there's been more people who self-publish… same for you?'

'Oh, no. I'm absolutely not in that… territory.'

You don't say?

'I tried submitting to a publisher, but these days, it seems to have little effect. I also released it anonymously on the internet, but it wasn't ideal either…'

'Mm hmm…'

It was originally asked on a whim; but to submit on the internet, let alone publishers,

shows massive improvement for someone whose social skills were previously abysmal.

'You have a PC though. I thought you said it would be expensive.'

'Ah, it's not that, you can go on the internet with even consoles these days. In terms of specs, compared to a regular PC, you could probably go further with a console… it's just the thought of digitising, I can't see myself doing it…'

'……?'

I couldn't keep up.

Luckily, the slug is about finished. I ended the topic by saying 'well, you can't always get what you want'; seeing as I started this conversation, to end it is only my responsibility too.

'Mm, indeed.'

Sengoku Nadeko put down her nib pen, and made her way to the screentones. *Screentones*, for fuck's sake.

If I left her to her devices, she might even take her sweet time to fill in the background, as she cut up that 61 screentone with a cutter.

'I —'

She said.

'— Can't always get what I want, and that makes me happy.'

Said the one who has always had life her way, the sweet girl sweeter than candied fruit.

006

The duel between the magical girl of justice and the slug monster is to take place at Rouhaku/Namishiro Park — for no reason in particular; it just happens to be the only fitting place I can think of.

There is one other empty, open space: Kitashirahebi Shrine. However, the god residing there has a near-telepathic relationship with oni no onii-chan, who might report my deeds to him.

Really, new guys (new gods?) are so inflexible and difficult to please. She would be wise to deal with such matters more gently, for the sake of this town's community — is the advice I have for her.

Well, a sparsely-equipped playground at night makes for an impeccable stage. While unnecessary, a barrier ought to be set up, just in case.

If I set up the stage in front of Araragi Tsukihi, then it would satisfy her curiosity to a certain extent.

Speaking of Araragi Tsukihi, she seems to have the wrong idea about acting as support for the magical girl of justice — she showed up with a black hakama, straight from kyūdō.

She does wear a kimono all the time (the weirdo joined the chadō club just because she likes them), but a hakama… does she think of herself as a warring bishoujo?

Her walking around like that at night makes her less a bishoujo and more a suspicious person.

But upon further inquiry, it turns out she borrowed it not from kyūdō, but from the naginata club.

Private schools, covering even the rare activities, huh.

The problem is, she not only borrowed the wear, but the gear as well — and it is not the bamboo analogues they use in clubs, but a real, bladed naginata.

'Ononoki-chan, I'm ready as your support! I'll protect myself, so Ononoki-chan, no need to worry about me, you can battle as you please!'

Salad oil was already menacing enough in Araragi Tsukihi's hands, but for her to wield a naginata, one of the strongest bladed weapons known to man — even I, someone well-experienced in combat, am left utterly speechless.

I'm worried all right.

You say you'll protect yourself, but it's making me want to protect myself from you.

Although this situation was born from my carelessness, if one thinks about it, this could be an excellent opportunity to communicate directly with Araragi Tsukihi, or, in other words, an exciting chance to probe at her mind, but honestly, I am not interested in studying this kid in-depth.

Seriously, while I do have big flaws in my personality (which I am acutely aware of), it is no wonder Gaen-san inserted me as a spy. If one cannot separate their job from their patience, monitoring Araragi Tsukihi would be impossible.

'…Have you brought the things I've asked you to?'

I say all that, but I haven't completely given up on caring, even though I could — let's just get this over with. With that thought, I said nothing more about her equipment, and sped towards Namishiro/Rouhaku Park, setting things up as fast as I can.

'I've got it~ from the kitchen~ there's enough at home, so I've brought enough for myself and Ononoki-chan~. But what's this salt for, exactly?'

As she asked incredulously, Araragi Tsukihi took out two salt bottles from her pocket. It appears she has taken my bluff as a foreign fantasy, so despite wearing Japanese clothes, she has no idea that the salt is for exorcising.

'My investigations suggest that the monster is hiding somewhere in this park. But the monster will react with salt, so if you could kindly sprinkle some salt around areas you find suspicious, that'd be great.'

Even if that's not the actual case, it is a slug.

It will react against salt.

Much as a woman in naginata clothes sprinkling salt in a park in the middle of the night is beyond suspicious, for her to at least have some 'sense of participation' is an important procedure.

Cumbersome as it may be, unlike extracting Sengoku Nadeko's Slug Tofu, it is a step that cannot be skipped — I heard that recent entertainment shows have

emphasised this ‘sense of participation’; perhaps in the future, we specialists have to do the same, placing performance above all.

Not a trend I can get behind.

‘Then I’ll start from the swings over there, and you’d better… you could start from the sandpit.’

‘Roger that~ ahaha, scattering salt on a sandpit, I feel like a sumo wrestler~’

Araragi Tsukihi responded animatedly, as she earnestly made her way to the sandpit and the slide.

But she could have said ‘no, I want to do the swings!’ for no reason at all. In any case, I cannot predict any of her reactions, so it’s nice that she ended up doing as I said.

Speaking of sending Araragi Tsukihi to the sandpit, the reason I did so is because during the day, I already hid Sengoku Nadeko’s slug illustration in the pit.

It accelerates the action a bit, and the sooner she finds the ‘otherworldly monster’, the better.

No matter if she’s holding a naginata or some salad oil, I will not let any layperson take care of any monsters, but having her witness me setting up a barrier and discovering the monster by sprinkling the salt herself, she should already have a great ‘sense of participation’. All that needs to be done (before Araragi Tsukihi needlessly butts in) is to finish the Slug Tofu.

After that, the magical girl of justice will return to her home dimension, and Araragi

Tsukihi will be left with her original mute plush.

As far as improvisation goes, it's a decent story.

Though I said I would start with the swings, to do so would be a waste of salt (and probably seen as a prank in poor taste), so I quietly tailed Araragi Tsukihi.

She may have said she would do it, but I don't trust that she would actually scatter the salt on the sand. She (to take an extreme example) could just open the cap and drink the salt for no reason.

In reality, under my watch, Araragi Tsukihi did a weird thing — not opening the cap, but first sprinkling the salt on her palms. I was dumbfounded by her actions, but she was probably only wanting to 'feel like a sumo wrestler', as she threw salt into the sand.

Really, I thought for a moment something would happen, but it seems that things will end smoothly — my fixes for a careless mistake have overcome their biggest hurdle.

Sengoku Nadeko's drawing in the sand — which, after she finished the background, she started drawing scenes, so I semi-forcefully took it away — reacts chemically, no, reacts monstrously with the salt, and once that happens, I will defeat it immediately, and end with a round of applause.

…Not that I'm saying this out of relief, but right then, I suddenly understood Sengoku Nadeko's words.

I can't always get what I want, and that makes me happy.

When I first heard it, I thought she was just bluffing — that maybe her meek looks hide a super masochistic pervert, which would be a bit off-putting.

But, while I am not completely ruling out such tastes, I only realised just now that she said it from a completely different place than I thought.

Yes, that.

'Human values' is what it's probably called.

Some say one cannot give it their all if they are not happy, but just as an airplane requires some headwind to take off, an overly saccharine life filled only with ups will lead one to question if they are really alive, or if all this was just a dream.

As prosperous one's life may be — be it being born with a silver spoon, or being born with unrivalled talent, intellect, or physique, people still live on with their dissatisfactions, their anxieties, not out of greed, but maybe because only with these complaints, these insecurities, can one feel truly alive.

And therefore — pursue human values.

Looking to inject a little difficulty into their livelihoods.

'……'

Eh.

I might be spoiling the view by saying this, but I died a long time ago, so none of it matters to me.

Words like values or lifestyles, to me, just feel like they come from a difficult book. If

you rattled them out onto a list, I could never take it to heart. Haven't got one.

…What about Araragi Tsukihi?

That girl may lack self-awareness, but this is an immortal aberration, an eternal undying bird, changing from one person to another, continuing from one person to another, probably until humanity's end; the only aberration to possess such eternity — the phoenix.

I lived once.

I no longer have memories of that time, but I know I lived once — meaning I know the difference between what it is to be dead, and what it is to be alive.

The latter like a dream, the former nothing much really.

Oni no onii-chan knows that.

The former Kissshot knows that.

But what about the undying bird?

For a being who only lives, who has nothing but life, do they know if they are alive or dead?

I do not wish for immortality, and even with mortality, I prefer living my life as a human — call it heroic self-indulgence (and oni no onii-chan probably would), but what would it feel to hear that line as a true immortal like that kid?

How cruel.

How insulting it must be to hear.

'Kyaaaaaaaaaaaa!'

As my mind was bogged down in such frivolous minutiae, I heard Araragi Tsukihi's shriek — why does this kid only sound like a

cute girl when she shrieks, I thought as I looked up.

I may have said we have overcome the biggest hurdle, but there was one remaining uncertainty — I do not know how people not in the field would react upon seeing this monster slug.

It's an oddity people in the field would like, so Oshino no onii-chan or Kaiki no onii-chan would probably enjoy it, but a slug is a slug, and although not too frightening, a girl's first reaction would be 'how disgusting', and might be let down by its appearance — which is something I worried about slightly, but it appears there was no need for that.

Normally, you need at least some technique in order to see oddities. If Araragi Tsukihi cannot see the monster after sprinkling salt and having it show up, then all this effort would have been meaningless, which is why I took special attention to not only put it on paper, but to have Sengoku Nadeko put it on paper.

The illustration materialising from the sand all of a sudden was to be my masterstroke in this story's climax… but, how do I put this…

It materialised all right, but it also expanded.

Sengoku's otherwise very moe slug shot out of the sandpit, its length in dozens of metres.

A simple, slimy design like a slug can look cute from a certain perspective, but if it's that big, it will incite humanly fears. Any person

would scream at the sight of this, let alone Araragi Tsukihi.

They'll shirk, and lose the ability to think —

Humans would.

But this is me.

My surprise, my fears have been severed from my actions, my emotions do not affect them at all; if that was not the case, I would probably be swallowed up by its mass.

'"un—'

I made no changes to my plan, and flew towards its body.

Araragi Tsukihi froze upon the shocking sight unfolding in front of her. One could say this was a happy miscalculation — her not getting in the way was a big help.

However, the original plan called for a wagon-sized monster; how did we end up with a Slug Tofu that rivals apartment blocks?

It's simple: Sengoku Nadeko.

I asked her laxly to draw something that looks like a slug, but no matter what she drew, she did spend some time as a deity, meaning I should not have asked her to. Sadly, this was also my mistake.

Meticulously drawing the background like a manga, instead of making it realistic, causes an error in perspective when the paper gets converted into three dimensions, making the slug larger. This also speaks to Sengoku Nadeko's illustration skills — while it is too early to tell, she might accidentally make it as a manga artist.

Or a specialist.

‘“limited—’

Should’ve went for Araragi Karen’s bee, I thought, but I do not regret this turn of events. If anything, I feel glad that all Kaiki no onii-chan did was give her a slug.

A slug can be gigantic, but even so, it is only gigantic.

I can handle this — with only a finger, even.

‘— “rulebook”.’

Like a skewer sticking through a marshmallow, I skewered through the Slug Tofu with my finger — the greatly enlarged slug, smashed through by my greatly fattened finger.

It disintegrated with little resistance.

The remains of the slug scattered all over the park — a rather grotesque sight, and the product of a few accidents, but everything did go according to plan.

As slug bits rained down all over, I spoke to the still-stiff Araragi Tsukihi.

‘Thank you. The hidden monster is defeated all thanks to you.’

I said.

A word of gratitude as insincere as this is probably never heard of. Then again, I am a corpse; don’t expect me to have stellar acting chops.

Moving on, I wanted to finish this as soon as I can — but I really shouldn’t as a pro; more haste, less speed.

I have constantly failed, no, misjudged from the start, and the biggest mistake to

date is being too hasty to end it all, without tidying up — I should maintain my battle mode as long as a slug piece is still in the air.

Strange. This has never happened before.

What's happened to me?

'Ononoki-chan! Behind you!'

Araragi Tsukihi, who has frozen still up until this point, finally spoke a line. This made me reflexively (which is unusual, considering I'm dead) turn around. But I missed it by fractions of a second.

Behind me was a giant Slug Tofu.

Returned to its original size and state.

A real existence existing in reality.

No, wait a second, slugs are not that kind of organism, right? They are not planarians; they may look similar, but that's it, they don't regenerate, right?

But in the end, to think that oddities can be 'that kind of organism' is a thought dumber than even an outsider's — a slug is a slug, but the thing on that paper is a Slug Tofu.

I realised.

Its slimy surface seemingly focussed its aim and shot out flames. One cannot conceive of it as a biological creature, let alone a slug, but only as a beast, a being with monstrous attacks — that was what I realised.

No, I could dodge it if I wanted to.

But with Araragi Tsukihi behind me, I couldn't — Araragi Tsukihi may be the shide no tori, and would live even bathed in the slug's flames, but if she finds out what she is

from that, then it would spell bad news for me.

Instead of that, I shall be her firewall. I think that sounds cool. Cool as it may sound, though, as I said earlier, I am a corpse who is weak against fire, and as I also said earlier, I am drenched in salad oil.

Speaking of being burnt, it was like a small campfire — in an instant, the flames engulfed my entire body.

'O-Ononoki-chan!'

Araragi Tsukihi screamed as I jumped backwards to avoid hurting her. Worry not, despite my constant miscalculations, regret is another thing split apart from my actions.

Even with an unavoidable mistake, one can always then correct it, such is my strong suit — unhampered by failure. Anyway, I rolled on the ground, trying to put the fire out.

Not just any roll, but an ultra-high-speed roll assisted by occasional uses of my "unlimited rulebook". Whilst not exactly dignified, in a moment like that, dignity was the least of my concerns.

This is not the time to act cool, I might genuinely go to the afterlife just because of this stupid thing — what is it with this feeling that nothing is going to plan?

This was, of course, also my mistake.

The Slug Tofu is something beyond my expertise, yet I fought it on equal terms — that was my misstep. The last thing I expected it to do was to shoot flames.

Simply put, in order to make it pop out visually, Sengoku Nadeko added flame patterns as screentones to that slug (why would she waste her skills on something like this…?), but even without that, I have no idea about the lore behind the Slug Tofu.

Slugs and flames; so that's it…

Aside from throwing salt at it, another method from olden times to defeat it was to burn incense, back when salt was expensive; maybe that was where it came from? Or could the key be tofu, like yaki-tofu, or yudofu…

If that's the case, then this aberration is more ferocious than I thought, and completely incompatible for me — immune to physical attacks, and itself attacks using flames; if anything, this aberration was born to deal with a monster like myself.

Considering that this artificial aberration was a product of Kaiki no onii-chan, that might really be the case… nothing out of the ordinary for that swindler to have a trick against me up his sleeve.

Yes, nothing out of the ordinary.

To have everything not go to plan, to be in this state of defeat, without anything weird happening to you — to change nothing despite throwing everything at it, this is exactly like oni no onii-chan or Sengoku Nadeko's troubles, isn't it?

Does this happen to everyone who ever crosses paths with Araragi Tsukihi?

Anyway, even with me saying that, I cannot give up — be it incompatibility or a

nemesis, I am obliged to clean up my own messes.

Even as I am left with burns all over, the flames were finally extinguished, and I immediately went for the slug's massive body — was what I originally had in mind, but when I turned my head around, the interdimensional monster had already vanished.

Eh?

Oi, oi.

What happened in the small amount of time I spent rolling to have made that mega-size slug disappear? It should be large enough to appear in my sight no matter what.

There was only one answer.

I knew it straight away — above me.

I looked up, and over the park, that tender slug was high up in the sky, so high that it looked pretty tiny. I have no idea how it jumped up there, but it seems it is going for the most primitive body attack — crushing me with its weight.

Body attacks are fine, but if it shoots flames to boot, there's nothing else I can do. If I am burnt whilst pinned down, I am really done for.

To be done for without even doing anything is the last possible outcome I want — so I dodged.

As many times as I have embarrassed myself, a clumsy, ill-thought-out body attack from top to bottom is something even a disgrace like Ononoki Yotsugi could dodge from.

It'd be a fabulous dodge, followed by a counterattack.

Luckily, I have a plan. I held in my hand the salt bottle Araragi Tsukihi gave me. Although I was not planning on using it, given that my opponent is a slug, no matter the size, salt will still work.

Onee-chan would probably hate underhanded solutions like this (if I have to say it, this is more Oshino no onii-chan's approach), but to not cling stubbornly to my identity, to adapt and improvise tactics when things go awry, those are precisely my streng—

'*Watch out, Ononoki-chan!*'

I got hit.

As I was concentrating on what was above me, planning a counter, and waiting for that timing, I was hit from the side by Araragi Tsukihi — with my centre of gravity concentrated on a single foot, even a girl's weak push could set me off-balance. I rolled on the ground several times once again.

No, what happened to me was not important.

Either way, I am outside of the slug's landing zone, so I'm fine — which means the one who bumped me off, Araragi Tsukihi, is completely in that landing zone.

Right at the last possible moment.

You idiot. Having been scared stiff by that monster so far, why only move at the moment you're least supposed to?

I did not even have the chance to say that to her.

Araragi Tsukihi's tiny body was crushed by that giant slug.

Probably not into a sheet like in comics — I cannot imagine what inhuman horror would come from being crushed under such a giant being.

To be crushed by a slug, to be crushed by a tofu, what would a human look like? Do you actually die like when you hit your head on the corner of a tofu block?

Of course, Araragi Tsukihi's act of self-sacrifice came without her own plan of self-defence. As always, it was a rash decision.

Without knowing I was a corpse.

Without knowing she was immortal herself.

She gave her life like it was the natural thing to do.

'…Just like Araragi Koyomi.'

But this makes things tricky.

More than tricky; the worst has happened.

The reason I say that is because when I was knocked off, the salt I had in my hand had also gone. The ace up my sleeve was now buried under the slug, somewhere in the great depths, alongside Araragi Tsukihi.

You have got to be kidding me.

Araragi Tsukihi's every move was done because she thought it was the right thing to do. And every move of hers backfired against her.

How could a person doing what they think is the right thing backfire *this* consistently?

No, not as a human — as an undying bird.

Without the danger that comes with mortality, there is no sense of danger. Without a sense of danger, normally avoidable disasters and incidents will come, one after the other. Instead of saying she's a bringer of plagues, it might be more apt to describe Araragi Tsukihi as an air pocket — no, now's not the time for surveying.

To start analysing in such dire circumstances is no different from escaping reality — I must devise a way to finish off the Slug Tofu. I adjusted my mindset.

But, even with an adjusted mindset, it is also separate from my actions — or should I say, with my calm analysis, I have 'nowhere to go'.

Not from reality, nor from what's in front of me.

Not because I cannot leave a pulverised Araragi Tsukihi here. Nothing humanitarian like that. To sever this mindset, to stop traipsing, to let the truth out at all costs, and to seek help from oni no onii-chan, *that's* what should be done by the bloodless corpse, as inferred from the manual — but all that is beyond me, for the fire has done some serious damage.

Serious and deep burns all over me.

This body, already dead, was also partially rotten — now there is no way I can use the rapidly-fattening "unlimited rulebook".

I cannot even move quickly, let alone attack quickly — that shove from Araragi Tsukihi was the nail in the coffin.

In face of this burning, giant slug, I have nowhere I can go, and nothing I can do. Nothing hands-on — nothing fingers-on.

…Eh, whatever.

Nothing I can do, but whatever.

The writing is on the wall.

Never in my worst nightmares have I dreamt of meeting my maker in such an erratic fashion, but I have already severed even this self-torment from me.

I have done the last thing a pro should do — break confidentiality — though to be honest, this is not the worst possible ending. Even with things like this, even as she has been ground into dust, Araragi Tsukihi is not dead, and will not die. Even if the dust causes a dust explosion and burns every bit of her away, she will not die. She is immortal, and therefore she will not shuffle from any mortal coil — she will just leisurely stroll back into life amidst the flames.

My mistakes will not result in the disappearance of our subject of study; this is the lowest bar of a professional's risk management. Gaen-san, who can sense my burns, will soon rid the world of this rampaging Slug Tofu.

As a corpse, I have nothing to lose.

As a spy, I have done the least I could do.

With that judgement, I fully gave up — a calm, rational judgement, definitely not one from the heart.

It's not from my heart.

Well, well, well, how should I put this, it's a new discovery.

With my cold judgement, observing my cold heart, I found something intriguing, something interesting; something deserving of laughter — bitter laughter, that is.

For a corpse who is long dead, to still resist death, to still find it petrifying —

Then.

Right then — *patan!*

It folded.

Not the slug, but space itself.

It is the only explanation I could muster. The Slug Tofu that had been transformed slammed shut with a 'patan', from both ends down the middle.

The three-dimensional styling is, in the end, a two-dimensional pictogram, an illusion one would trick a child with, and like its unceremonious unravelling, the slug disappeared into thin air — no matter how much salt I could hose at it, the slug only loses moisture and shrinks, and wouldn't disappear so cleanly — what's going on?

But in actuality, the Slug Tofu is truly gone.

No signs, no foreshadowing.

The only thing left is the thing crushed by the monster's weight, the being that has mixed with the ground, the remains of Araragi Tsukihi — an annoying sight.

An unfathomable turn of events, an unjudgeable phenomenon; as I was busy being confused, I heard a voice from the sandpit.

'This isn't like you, Ononoki-chan.'

I turned over to its source — there it is.

I saw a god.

This town's goddess — the new god.

With twin ponytails and a rucksack, looking like a right little girl — her name is Hachikuji Mayoi.

Mayoi nee-san.

'No matter what you do to it in three dimensions, it's not its main body — you should strike it in two dimensions.'

The little girl said; she held in her hand a neatly folded sheet of manga genkō yōshi, presumably dug out from the sand.

The lovely illustration of a slug from the destined-to-be-famous manga artist is gone, once it got folded — covered.

Sealed.

'……'

I see.

Even as it materialised, it was still a sheet of paper. It turns out Araragi Tsukihi was not the one blinded by the magical girl of justice setting, but myself.

How have I not thought of… something so simple?

I remained agape, as Mayoi nee-san perked up her chest.

'Hu, hu, hu. It appears you were attempting to do this in secret, but unfortunately for you, I am the goddess who looks over this town, and I get around — anytime, anywhere.'

'Anywhere' is probably an embellishment.

Oh yeah, I only thought of it just now, but when you think about it, settling on this park

as the stage was also the wrong choice — for this park is also closely connected to the snake-worshipping Kitashirahebi Shrine.

A barrier was a waste of time.

If I wanted to do this behind Mayoi nee-san's back, not only would I have to avoid her residence in Kitashirahebi Shrine, but by extension, this park too — however, it was also this failure that saved me.

'I didn't want to interfere with the pros, but with the town in danger and my friend in a pinch, I couldn't just stand by and watch. So, I did what little I can to help — which means,'

The snail and the snake, Hachikuji Mayoi, folded the sealed slug ever smaller, as she gave a majestic smile, cheekily saying something resembling her catchphrase.

'Sorry, a slip of the hand.'

007

Satisfied at maybe her line, or maybe at her excellent work, Mayoi nee-san promised not to tell oni no onii-chan about this, and returned to the mountains — putting that folded sheet into her rucksack.

Wouldn't it have been better to tear up that sheet, I thought, but for the snail goddess, the slug can perhaps be considered her kin — with her having so many friends as oddities, she probably thinks it wiser to treat not only the humans well, but the aberrations, too.

Besides, it would be a pity if Sengoku Nadeko's painstakingly-illustrated slug was torn to shreds, and it was Mayoi nee-san who did all the work; all I have done so far is fail over and over, the last thing I should do is grumble.

My bad for saying you were inflexible.

Turns out you can be plenty flexible. As expected of a mollusc.

It goes without saying that the pulverised Araragi Tsukihi recovered whilst I was discussing with Mayoi nee-san on how to clean things up — her naginata hakama was torn and muddied, but the skin and flesh underneath it was free from any blemishes.

Sleeping soundily, too.

Were I an ordinary expert, I would probably be touched by her self-sacrifice, and be more lenient in my surveillance, but for me, gratitude or owing people one are things that do not affect any of my future work.

Or should I say, I'm still fuming.

Because when you think about it, the reason why I burnt more brightly was because that bastard threw salad oil at me, and upon further analysis, one would conclude that things escalated to where they were not purely down to my mistakes.

Attempts to salvage the situation only made it worse — when one thinks about it, one realises the moment Araragi Tsukihi got flattened and lost consciousness was a *deus ex machina* moment — anyone could see what caused all this.

Anyone could see *who* caused all this. The amount of evidence is such that some experts would classify the shide no tori as a dangerous entity from this incident alone, and send in a task force for its neutralisation.

The biggest prey since Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade at her full strength, a phoenix-level prey.

But these things I did not report to Gaen-san, for good reason — obviously, I did not want to add insult to my embarrassments as a professional, but more importantly, I have confirmed a new discovery about the shide no tori, which for me, is the real reason.

In any case, I took Araragi Tsukihi back to the Araragi household whilst she was sleeping, and spent the rest of the night fixing these burns on my embalmed corpse, with a glimmer of hope that she would treat all that happened as a dream, me returning to the subject's room disguised as a plush. The next day, Araragi Tsukihi not only treated what

happened as a dream — she forgot every part of it.

As before, I was a to-scale plush to her, and from her attitude, *I* seemed to be the one who thought of yesterday as a dream, which is quite inconceivable.

Previously, when I obliterated Araragi Tsukihi's top half, the reason she did not remember was because her mind had no time to process my attack, and the reason she lost her memories of that moment was because it never entered her short-term memory; such was the accepted explanation.

But this time, Araragi Tsukihi had lost not only her short-term memory, but the memory for almost the entire day — an almost ideally cut montage where the animated plush, the magical girl of justice, the giant slug and the pulverisation were deleted from her recollections. This cannot be explained simply with 'forgetting due to shock from death'.

It is a mysteriously selective amnesia.

However, were one to ignore the chaos, and analyse from a pro's perspective, this memory loss has a simple explanation. Instead of 'forgetting due to shock from death', it is 'forgetting the shock of death'.

The two are not the same thing.

Bodily injury and inner injury — that would be an appropriate metaphor, like how one can see a broken body, but not a broken heart.

A broken heart — that is, psychological trauma.

But this is more than a metaphor; different doctors exist to treat these different wounds. Bodily injury and mental damage are not that different after all.

Memories of past abuse reappearing in occasional flashbacks and affecting one's life in future is a symptom common throughout every age in history — the past becoming an aftereffect, planting itself deeply into one's core, making life a more difficult path to walk.

This feeling of 'suffering' can even drive people to suicide, and that is no exaggeration — a broken heart can prove fatal.

That's why.

That's why these wounds — they must be healed.

Yes, the shide no tori.

The eternal aberration, the phoenix, can heal even its non-bodily injuries — any memory that threatens to interfere with it living is removed, without a single trace.

The animated plush, the magical girl of justice, the giant slug, the pulverisation — for such out of the blue, fanciful, and ridiculous memories to stay would prove problematic to its existence in future.

Therefore, beyond a certain limit of acceptance, the brain cells that marked these anomalous memories would reset, and return to a blank slate. An ability to magically remove bad memories — or, to put it better, a self-defensive ability to automatically seal off psychological trauma.

In reality, in this town, there is also another erratic genius who can force off

memories they dislike onto somebody else — there is also an erratic oddball who could stick their finger into their brains, modifying their memory as they wish.

This abnormal act of self-cleansing, when utilised to its fullest, has allowed Araragi Tsukihi to remain the lively figure she is. It is this liveliness that also ensures Araragi Tsukihi never learns and never grows.

These failures, these dangers are doomed to repeat themselves, all around them, gradually accumulating.

Piling up, welling up — kindling for a new flame.

The brightly burning, undying bird.

In the centre of the flames, those mistakes and failures turn into dust, its ashes taking off without leaving a trace, continuing its life from the very beginning.

…It's horrifying. Horrifying, yet fascinating. Fascinating, with deep implications.

At least during this time of suspended sentencing, one should observe her using this never-before-considered point of view. She has at the very least an academic value.

With it, I also consider myself lucky that she has neatly forgotten all my failings, so I decided against reporting this to my superiors.

A decision such as this could be a sign of Araragi Tsukihi's influence — the reason why I did that might be due to the shide no tori's self-defensive abilities.

But anyway, I'll let her live to see another day.

The observation continues.

This unknown life form has, however little, unveiled its mysterious self, so I'll continue observing and protecting this natural wonder.

And so, to avoid making the same missteps, I decided to empty the lolicon's ice cream stock as soon as possible — once confirming the subject has well and truly set off for school, I sneakily retrieved the cups of ice cream from the freezer, placed them on the bed, and enjoyed all five flavours in order.

'Ah, aah! I didn't feel like going to school for some reason so I did a U-turn and went back home and my plush is eating ice cream!?'

Returning to her room, Araragi Tsukihi screamed, just like yesterday.

…Magical girl of justice, part II.

She never learns and never grows — but that's okay. I swear on my life I'm not failing next time.

Afterword

They say there is a fine line between fools and geniuses, and one would be inclined to agree, but once you apply common sense to it, it becomes apparent that fools and geniuses cannot be any more different. I can't help but say that there's nothing more important in this world than common sense. But if one does not apply common sense, then that 'fine line' might refer not to the fools or geniuses themselves, but the treatment they get. History is chock full of geniuses misunderstood as fools by the people around them; the reverse is also true. I guess a genius can't be a genius until people start treating them as one, but a fool could be a genius as long as people believe them to be one? Well, if we don't talk about geniuses by description or fools by comparison, but judge them by their existences, then this cannot be absolute, but relative; the key premise being 'belonging in a minority', with one commonality between them a disadvantaged status in their groups. Then, the one thing a genius needs is 'the talent to be understood'. To not be crushed beneath incomprehensibility or misunderstandings, to receive support… more plainly, the talent of attaining sponsorship? In that sense, the idea of geniuses living and using their talents their way doesn't really exist, because in reality, their life is lived for 'everybody's appeasement' until the very end. As for the fools, perhaps they try their damndest to not

be understood, acting more mysterious than they make out to be, disguising themselves as the real deal. If that is so, then there is a fine line between a fool and a genius; either way, it's all thanks to everybody supporting them (joke intended).

Anyway, this book is a collection of tales with three foolish girls as the main characters. Oikura Sodachi, Kanbaru Suruga, Araragi Tsukihi. These three people, all possessing their own foolishness, all showing their foolishness in their own way; I wish everybody takes their light failures with heavy hearts. Ah, I could've only written this after I have finished the series, a compilation of chapter zeroes, but whether it's the unyielding Oikura, the undeterred Kanbaru, or the undying Tsukihi, if it's reviewed well, I might start writing a chapter one. Some say the line dividing geniuses and fools is 'the talent of persistence', but I think what really matters is 'the talent of persistence in face of talentlessness', and this is something all three of them have. This book is composed one hundred percent of stories I continued as a hobby, *Monogatari*'s Off Season, '*Orokamonogatari* — Chapter Zero: Sodachi Fiasco, Chapter Zero: Suruga Bonehead, Chapter Zero: Tsukihi Undo'. Oh, and, I said they were a collection of chapter zeroes just now, but 'collection' is probably too strong a way of putting it.

The cover depicts the (for the author) rapidly-rising-in-popularity Ononoki Yotsugi-chan, illustrated by VOFAN-san. She gets put

through the most in this book, so I'm really overjoyed to see her drawn so cutely. I would also like to thank Kodansha Novels for letting me continue the *Monogatari* series after its conclusion. The anime adaptation is also hitting its stride, and I ask for your continued support.

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